

## THE RÍMUR POET AND HIS AUDIENCE

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This paper, which hardly fits a conference with the theme *The Audience of the Sagas*, is something in the nature of a protest. A protest against a persistent bias in Nordic studies which works from both ends. The Saga Society, which looks after the older periods of Scandinavian literature, seems to be fixed on an early Golden Age - the words "early medieval" or "early Nordic" appear in almost every workshop title - as if we were a band of early 19th c. Romantics. The International Association for Scandinavian Studies, the guardian of Scandinavian literature of the more recent periods, is similarly absorbed by modernity - it was quite daring of them to break through 'The Modern Breakthrough' and to stretch themselves as far back as Romanticism at their 1988 conference. The centuries in between the ground covered by the two societies are not neglected by individual scholars but they seem to have a hard time asserting themselves on the conference circuit.

The subject matter of my paper is, then, not the sögur but the genre of epic narrative that succeeded them and remained dominant in literary production in Iceland for half a millenium, from the 15th to the 19th century. It may be taken as a sign of Icelandic stubbornness or independence of mind that they switched to a form of verse epic just as other European literatures were abandoning the verse epic for prose, while Iceland had produced superb narrative prose at a time when the rest of Europe could not conceive of narrative literature except in verse. Many of the early rímur cycles were simply reworkings of sögur, at times following the texts almost word for word within the formal and stylistic constraints of the new form. To that extent, there is a link with the 'sagas' of our conference theme.

The 'audience' in my title is not a historical body of listeners but the listening partner implicit in the text of the rímur. In this respect, the step from saga to rímur meant a change of paradigm more drastic than the formal leap from prose to a new verse form with elaborate conventions. The sögur are unique, in a medieval context, in their virtual lack of an explicit authorial presence, of a narrator pointing out, commenting, moralising, or simply assuming the God-like role of reading the fictional characters' minds and hearts. In the rímur, in contrast, the narrator asserts his presence continuously, by speaking in his own name at the beginning and the end of each ríma, and by making his presence felt by referring to himself or to his sources at frequent intervals.

When I say 'presence', I do not necessarily mean a manifestation of his historical individuality, as a person with a specific background and specific experiences, with individual opinions, prejudices, emotions. A scholar who, in the 19th c. fashion, would wish to use the rímur to reconstruct the life and personality of the author, would find few nuggets in the course of his quest. Whether fleeting references within the narrative, the conclusion of each ríma or the substantial first-person section at the beginning of each ríma - usually between six and ten stanzas - they are largely stereotyped in content and partly also in form, which is an argument for assuming a considerable period of oral tradition before the first ríma appears in writing.<sup>1</sup>

The opening section is the most varied one. Often it justifies its name, *mansöngur*, by dealing with love, either the poet's love for a particular (unnamed) woman, or

<sup>1</sup> In the Flateyjarbók, ca. 1390.

about his lack of success in love matters. Or he can deplore the reprehensible practice of using *mansöngur* for lewd purposes, or women's foolishness in falling for such literary evidence of love. Criticism or complaint is often the keynote; the subject can be the poet's age, poor state of health, or economic conditions, or his perceived lack of literary skill, or the political state of affairs. Or he often simply says "I am composing poetry" in a very elaborate way. If one compares the concerns, opinions and attitudes expressed by the *mansöngvar* of one and the same *rímur* cycle, the picture of the 'author' emerging may not be very consistent. If, on the other hand, *mansöngvar* of different authors are compared, the stereotyped nature of the contents emerges.<sup>2</sup> This suggests that the author not so much makes an individual statement as assumes an accepted, traditional role - he 'performs' in a situation which warrants first-person statements and an interplay, however formalised, with his audience.

These are well-known facts - well-known, that is, among readers of *rímur*, which may not be a majority of Old Norse scholars. I thought it might be worthwhile examining what results a detailed investigation of some particularising *rímur* cycles would yield. Unfortunately, for reasons of time, I had to restrict myself to just four: the *Vilmundar rímur víðutan* (henceforth abbreviated 'Vilm'; 16 *rímur*, 1143 stanzas) by a certain Ormur, of about 1530, if we accept Ólafur Halldórsson's late dating<sup>3</sup>, two cycles by Hallgrímur Pétursson, the author of the beloved *Passíusálmur*, namely *Króka-Refs rímur* (abbrev. 'KR'; 13 *rímur*, 936 stanzas) and *Rímur af Lykla-Petri og Magelónu* (abbrev. 'LPM'; 9 *rímur*, 638 stanzas),<sup>4</sup> of about 1650, and Sigurður Breiðfjörð's *Rímur af Þórði hræðu*<sup>5</sup> (abbrev. 'Þhr'; 10 *rímur*, 717 stanzas) of 1820. The material on which these observations are based thus comprises 48 *rímur* or 3434 stanzas.

I will for the moment disregard the *mansöngvar* and the conclusions and look at instances of authorial presence scattered over the narrative sections. By 'authorial presence' I mean not just occasions where the author speaks in the first person but any instance where he alludes to the performance situation, e.g. by referring to his source or asserting the veracity of the story. Such remarks may be stereotyped or simply inserted because they supply a needed number of syllables, alliterations, end rhymes or internal rhymes demanded by the stringent rules of the chosen metre, but they nevertheless remind the audience of the other 'scene', as Lars Lönnroth called it,<sup>6</sup> the presence of a performer and their own presence as an audience. Among the works considered here, such instances occur most frequently in *Vilm* (114 times, or more than seven times, on average, in every *ríma*), a little less frequently in *Hallgrímur* (KR: 83 times; average of more than six times per *ríma*; LPM: 45 times, average of five times per *ríma*), and least often in *Þhr* (33 times, average over three times per *ríma*).

Instances of authorial presence in the narrative parts can be divided into three large groups:

- (1) References to the author or his work, namely
  - 1.1 'I tell you' / 'the *ríma* tells you';
  - 1.2 'I told you' / 'the *ríma* told you';
  - 1.3 'I will tell you' / 'the *ríma* will tell you'.

<sup>2</sup> See the chapter on *mansöngvar* (266-284) in BJÖRN K. ÞÓRÓLFSSON, *Rímur fyrir 1600*, Kaupmannahöfn 1934 (Safn Fræðafélagsins um Ísland og Íslendinga).

<sup>3</sup> *Istenzkar miðaldarímur iv - Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi*, Rit 6, Reykjavík 1975.

<sup>4</sup> Ed. Finnur Sigmundsson; Rit Rímnafélagsins vii, Reykjavík 1956.

<sup>5</sup> In: *Rímna safn i*, Reykjavík 1971, 43-135

<sup>6</sup> *Den dubbla scenen*: Muntlig diktning från Eddan till Abba. Stockholm 1978.

1.A A special case is the author addressing a particular person or particular persons in the audience; this is not uncommon in the *mansöngvar* but very rare in the narrative.

(2) References to the source of the story, namely

2.1 'I have been told';

2.2 'The work/poem says'; this is often ambiguous as it can refer to the source or to the poet's own reshaping of it;

2.3 'The book says'; here, the reference to a written source is unambiguous (though not necessarily truthful).

2.A A special case is the assertion of truthfulness which can, but does not have to, refer to the source.

(3) References expressing the author's opinion, namely

3.1 'I think' / 'I believe';

3.2 A comment on an aspect of the story.

1.1 is particularly frequent in relative clauses: KR vii 21 *sem skýri* eg frá (cp. KR vi 21). Vilm<sup>7</sup> iii 53 *sem inni* eg (cp. i 14; xii 37); LPM iv er *segi* eg frá; Vilm xiii 24 *sem hermi* eg frá; KR v 32 *sem rædi* eg frá; Vilm vi 70 *sem eg greini*; Vilm vi 63 *sem tel* eg. In other syntactic contexts: *skýra* Vilm i 12, KR viii 75; *greina* KR iv 30, xi 29; *herma* KR vi 23. Other verbs: Vilm x 40 *eg votta* skjótt; LPM ix 27 *kveð* eg; þhr i 12 *ég fræði* yður. With *fá* as auxiliary: KR i 15 *fæ* *eg fest*; KR xiii 50 *fæ* *eg tjáð*; þhr viii 66 *greint* *eg fæ*. *Nefna* is mostly used to introduce a new character (where a saga author might use the impersonal forms 'er nefndr' or 'hét'): Vilm i 10 Visinvoid *nefn* eg (cp. iii 15 under 1.3), but also þhr x 17 *ég nefni* sísona.

In negative contexts ('I am not telling', 'I have difficulties telling'): Vilm i 12 *skýr* *eg ei hvað* hún heitir; þhr x 16 Nenni *ég ekki að herma* hér / hvernig bragnar sátu; Vilm x 32 *Seint verður* oss *tíl mála*.

1.2. References to persons or events mentioned before also occur mostly in relative clauses if they appear in the course of the narrative: Vilm ii 12 *sem fyr voru nefndar* sögunni i (cp. þhr ii 49); Vilm iv 12 *sem greindi* eg fyrri i spjalli (cp., not in first-person form, iv 31 and xv 10); Vilm x 22 *sem hermdum* vér; in impersonal constructions: Vilm x 53 *sem innt* er frá; xii 55 *sem kynnt* er fyrri; KR x 9 *getið* er fyrr um fræða reit; x 15 forðum glögg *þess getið* varð.

The most frequent references to an earlier stage of the narrative occur at the beginning of the 'epic' part of the ríma, after the *mansöngr*. Rímur were intended for oral delivery, normally sung, and represented 'Vortragsabschnitte', the amount of text rendered at one 'sitting'. Hence the audience had to be reminded were the singer/poet left off, possibly the evening before, at times probably after a longer interval. The general formula for these openings of the narrative sections is "(Last time,) I / the ríma stopped where...", followed by a situation, a character or an incident described at the end of the preceding ríma.

Simple references in first-person form are: Vilm viii 11, KR xii 11 *Hvarf* eg frá þar... LPM ii 9 *Hætti* eg við þar... þhr ii 7 þar *ég áður þulu hætti* míni... LPM v 10 *Skilda* eg við þar... Vilm xiii 10 *Greindi* eg næst... Vilm ix 11 (Af bróður hennar) *birti* eg fyrr... KR xiii 12 *Áður lýsti* eg atburð... LPM iv 10 *Geymda* eg fyr i gríðar byr... Vilm iii 11 *hefi* eg þáð sett i óðinn minn... Vilm vi 8 *frétt hefi* eg rétt... KR viii 9 *Felldi* eg óð i fyrri sinn um... þhr v 12 *Minn var áður málateinn* / margbrotinn um... þhr vi 10 *Bragur minn var áðan* einn á enda þulinn / sem..

Simple impersonal references: Vilm x 2 *sem fyrr var getið* i kvædi, cp. LPM vi 10 *getið* var i fræði fyr... LPM viii 7 Fyrri *tjáði* fræði þar... KR v 11 *Ræðan* var i

<sup>7</sup> For reasons of consistency and readability, the orthography of Vilm quotations has been normalised.

*rénan þar...*, Vilm xvi 4 rétt var þannin riman fylld... KR vi 11 Örðug mæðin áðan srið / öll þar falla náði.

Sometimes the rima is referred to by one of the elaborate kennings for '(the mead of) poetry' characteristic of mansógr, usually harking back to Skáldskaparmál chs. 5-6: Suttung's or Oden's gain (Vilm xiv 7 Suptuns gróður sagði óður / seggjum) næst og ekki góður; xv 8 Fyrri greindi Fjölfnis gróður / fræða galla); dwarf's ship or life-saving (KR iii 13 Norðra lét eg hafna hauk / hlaupa áðan þar í kaf...; iv 9 Dregið af sundi dverga far / Dvalins í nausti hvíldi þar...; KR vii 10 Suðra far að sandi þar / Suptungs hlaðið minni / brotnaði þar, sem...; LPM ix 5 þar var dverga lausnin lifs / lægð í hyrjar gráði<sup>8</sup>...); Oden's ale yeast (LPM vii 10 þar trú eg stæði kólnud kveik / Kjalars í drykkjar vinnu...); Oden's arrow (KR ix 6 Hnikars lá þar hulin ör...).

1.3 Here the poet/performer announces what he is about to tell the audience: Vilm i 52 Af siklings arfa segja skal fyst; Vilm iv 47 ýtum það eg greina vil (cp. LPM viii 39, þhr i 14), þhr v 77 því skal líka greina frá; Vilm ix 22 nú skal herma að...; xiv 34 Hröðrar val að herma skal, þhr x 32 herma verð; Vilm xi 17 svo vil eg inna í Sónar mar; KR vi 18 Ólufu vil eg glósa; LPM vi 17 þar so til sem birta skal; vii 69 skal nú tjá; þhr iii 37 sem eg frá mun spjalla; þhr vi 14 Nú mun verða að nefna fleiri njóta stála. Or the poet declines to tell the audience something: Vilm iii 39 Eg kann ekki að koma við fleira að sinni; KR ix 74 (King Harald's prophetic description of Refr's virki in Greenland)Í setning kvæða sízt eg kann / sveit að fræða um atburð þann.

Such announcements often mark the introduction of a new person or the beginning of a new episode and are thus similar to the 'change of scene' situation where in the sögur, too, the author intervenes to bridge the narrative discontinuity. The difference is again, as with the introduction of new characters, that in the sögur an impersonal form is favoured ("þar er frá at segja". "Nú er þar til at taka") while in the rimur the author is more likely to speak in the first person.

The most usual formula is "Let's turn to/away from..." (*Vikjum* til... Vilm v 11, xi 59, xvi 30, frá... LPM v 4), "I have to turn to..." (Vilm viii 31) or "The story turns to..." (*vikur* KR x 6, x 23, xii 12; xi 10 Rimar þangað æðu snýr; KR viii 11 Til Vikur aftur visan fer, Vilm v 12 Til visis dóttur verður að venda) or "...from..." (KR xii 53 Ræðan vikur ræsir frá; "Let's relate what..." (Vilm viii 31 Greinum hitt hvað gjörðist...). More elaborate KR viii 34 Af ljóða porti um Noreg næst / náms eg svipti hurðu; þhr vi 36 Fjölfnis hani flýgur minn og frá því glósi, er...

Sometimes it is a two step operation: "Let's leave X and turn to Y": Vilm iii 15 Seggir hverfa úr sögu og þessa fræði / Algaut nefni eg ýtran jarl; x 48 Látum hoskan hvilast þar / hrumpvengs nöðru starfa / Vestrar ferju vikja skal / vist til þengils arfa; xii 13 Látum gildan geymir hers hjá götnum sitja / fleira verða að fylla kvæði / frægðar menn með stoltar æði; LPM vi 42 Látum fangaðan dvelja dreng... *Vikjum* þangað Fjölfnis feng, sem...; KR iv 32 Kemur lítt við söguna sú / segja verður fleira nú. KR vi 54 Í hætti settum hulið hjal / eg hlýtt til þrautar teygja; LPM vii 68 Viðrix gildi vik eg frá / vænni bauga þöllu / skarlati Hildi skal nú tjá / hvað skeði í greifans höllu.

Further expressions for 'Leaving X' (without mentioning Y): Vilm iii 29 segir nu ekki meira af þeim, þhr ii 16 Ljóðin sleppi þeim um síð, vii 62 söguna við er skilinn hann. 'Koma við söguna', as above, for the introduction of new characters also in KR i 25, 'koma til sögunnar' KR ii 12. "Let's get on with it!", Hallgrímur at times admonishes himself: KR 20 Yggjar fundur óðs um krá / aftur snúi veginn á; iv 26 Til sögunnar í svip eg renn.

<sup>8</sup> The editor lists *hyrjar gráð* under kenningar for 'hugur, brjóst', but *hyrr* 'fire' does not make sense. Rather, we may suspect that that *hyrjar* is a gen.obj and that 'hunger, greediness for fire' is a water kenning, the whole phrase meaning 'the dwarf ship was sunk [at the end of the last rima] where.'

1.A. While the audience, or an individual in it, are often addressed in the *mansöngvar*, I have only found two such specific references in the narrative of LPM, namely the 'skarláts Hild(i)' in the passage quoted in 1.3 and the 'þorna Lín' to be quoted in 3.2.

2.1. The rímur poet may be proud of his poetic skill but he claims to relate a true story and therefore often, as a proof of authenticity, refers to 'having heard' or 'having read' a particular fact. The most frequent formula is 'frá eg', which is also a handy line-filler where two extra syllables are needed. It does not occur in Þhr, but no less than 32 times in Vilm and 12 times in Hallgrímur. Equivalent expressions occur only occasionally: KR xlii 70 *hef eg það af fræði frétt* (cp. LPM ii 48); Vilm iv 14 af höldum völdum *hermt var mér*; Vilm vi 62 sem þegnar *spjalla*; Vilm x 35 sem sagt er frá; KR iii 47 *var það komid so fyrir mig*; Þhr 29 *er þess getið*; Þhr x 29 sem *birtir skraf*.

2.2. The indiscriminate use made of a great variety of words meaning 'poetry', 'poem', 'work of literature' often allows no certain conclusion whether the poet is speaking of his source or his own work. Whichever it is in a particular instance, he moves from the fictional scene to the performing scene in that instant. I list the lexical items in order of frequency:

Vilm viii 18 sem hermir *fræði* (cp. iii 56, x 8, xiii 58, KR vi 15, LPM viii 82; LPM ix 85 er segir í *fræða línunum*); Vilm vii 51 *bragfuhrinn trú eg svo ræði* (cp. x 64, xiii 30, Þhr iv 13); Vilm xvi 8 *sagan vill þannin hljóða* (cp. i 15, Þhr v 43); Þhr ix 59 um sem heyrast *sögur*; Vilm iii 32 sem *óðurinn tór* (cp. iv 23, KR xiii 82); Vilm xvi 15 *kvædin segja að..* (followed by something that is not in the source) cp. Vilm iii 39, LPM ix 76); Vilm xi 76, Þhr i 67 *ríman segir..*; KR iv 47, xi 32 sem innir *spil*; KR vi 13 Þorgils tjörgu Týrinn hér / tel eg *málið kalli*; KR vii 32 sem innir *tal*; Þhr viii 21 sem *ljóðin inna*; KR x 47 sem greinir *spjall* (again about something not found in the source); Þhr vi 21 sem *mærdin greinir*; Vilm xi 9 *Orða snilld.. áður skýrði*; Vilm xvi 8 So *réd greina Sónar vín* (xvi 23 *Suðra vín*)  
Verbal phrases: Vilm xiii 36 sem *kynt er frá*; KR iv 48 sem *greinir frá*; LPM iv 54 *getið er þess*.

2.3. Post-Reformation Hallgrímur is particularly fond of invoking the authority of a written source in a general form, even though that source may not fully confirm him, as when he says KR xiii 77 about Refr having settled down in Skagen: *Átján ár þar sat með sóm / so er greint í letri*, while the Króka-Refs saga only says "nökkura vetr"<sup>9</sup> - but then, there are not many words rhyming with 'sankti Petri'. Other instances of *letur* are found in KR liii 67, v 58, vii 70, xi 19, LPM v 44 (orða letur), ix 88, Vilm xiv 17, xv 11. *Bók* is also popular: Vilm xv 24 (*Svo vill birta bókin frá*), KR iii 26, iv 20, v 19, xii 66, xiii 33, LPM i 21, ii 19, ii 22, vii 55. *Historian* KR x 13 and the pl. KR xii 65 í *historíunum* þetta finnum presumably also mean written sources. Further KR x 70 þannin greinir *rit*. A confused kenning is Vilm xvi 61 *Svo vill greina Sónar skrá*; 'Són's wine' (quoted above) makes sense for 'poetry'. 'Són's [written] list' does not.  
Verbal phrases: Vilm xiii 54 *lesid er lengur*; Þhr viii 62 *ritað finn* (Sigurðurður's only reference to a written source).

2.A. Assertions of truth are mostly found in Vilm; there are none in Þhr. In one instance (Vilm vii 25 *það stendur í dag til merkja*) it corresponds to a similar assertion in the saga source; otherwise they are the rímur poet's addition: Vilm. i 32 *kyndi eg allt hið sanna*, vii 14 af *sönnum* orða greinum, xi 17 *slikt er satt með öllu*, cp. LPM vii 11 *satt eg um það glósa*, ix 75 *frá eg að sönnu* and ix 74 *skal eg hið rétta inna*, KR vi 42 sem skýri eg hér *með rétti*; Vilm ix 11 *bragurinn vill það sanna*, cp. KR x 17 *sanna þetta öldin kann*. "I am not exaggerating": Vilm vii 14

<sup>9</sup> Íslensk fornrit xv 160.

Sagan er ekki af seggjum rengd (after describing Vilmundur's prowess at spear-throwing); xi 18 Ekki slíkt með orðum vex / oss í ljóða gjörðum (before claiming that hardly six men could lift the rock Vilmundur lifted by himself).

3.1. Expressions under this heading are part of a role-play on the performing scene. They are not so much to convey the convictions, assumptions, guesses of the poet as to draw the audience into the act by inviting them to consider the plausibility of the events related. By feigning conviction, uncertainty or doubt, he makes himself one of the audience, so to say, and thus becomes a true mediator between the fictional plane and the listeners. In reality, 'trú eg' may be the same sort of line-filler as 'frá eg', but both create links between the audience and the fiction, links provided by the performer's 'personal' experience.

Hallgrímur uses these little insertions a great deal, Sigurður never. They are listed in order of frequency: *trú eg* Vilm vii 51, 68, KR i 25, 66, vii 24, xi 24, LPM vi 34, vii 10, 14, ix 88, pl. *trúum* KR v 15; *get eg* Vilm i 65, KR i 69, ii 13, xi 36, xiii 51; *tel eg* KR i 42, vi 13, ix 27; *ætla eg* Vilm vi 73, vii 33; *hygg eg* LPM vii 83.

3.2. The mansöngvar are the place for comments by the poet/performer, but occasionally they are found in the narrative as well.

Vilm has only ohne such passage when the author in v 67 anticipates future events: Skjótt mun svikanna skamt á milli.

LPM has two comments in the ninth and last ríma. In st. 72 the author says his pen is unable to describe the joy of the lovers finally reunited: Fögnuð þeirra Fjölnis vin / fær ei greint með öllu / það má sérhver þorna Lín / þenkja í minnis höllu. In 79 he takes a short cut by only briefly describing the next recognition scene, that of parents and son: Hjónin þegar sinn þekktu son / þó (var.: so) til fátt vér leggjum / gleðinnar nægð sem var til von / vóx fyrir hvorutveggjum.

Sigurður generally takes a fairly light-hearted approach to his story; e.g., he occasionally calls the main character 'Monsér Þórður'. In i 45 the story of King Sigurður slefa's lecherous ways with the wife of the Hersir Klyppur make him laugh. In v 43-46 he expresses doubt whether the nightly encounters between Sigríðr and Ormr were as innocent as the saga claims. In x 15 he says that everybody was invited to a wedding except himself and comments that the poor always miss out.

Space will not allow a full discussion of authorial presence in the mansöngr but some general observations can be made to illustrate both the tenacity of tradition and the individuality of an author's handling of that tradition. It will not come as a surprise that the oldest work, Vilm, is the most formalised, and the youngest, Þhr, the most individualised of the four works in question.

One such tradition is a difference of style between mansöngr and the narrative bulk of the ríma. While the latter abound in kenningar for 'man' and 'woman' and occasionally for other popular referants such as 'ship' or 'battle', and while some metres may call for all sort of grammatical contortions to satisfy the rules, the diction is characterised, on the whole, by an easy flow. In the mansöngr and the corresponding short conclusion of each ríma a much more elaborate style is used. There are, in particular, plentiful references to the story of the winning of the mead of poetry by Oden in the form of kennings for 'poetry', 'poem', and these can in turn form the basis of extended *concelli*. This is true, at least, of the older rímur, and the complication can be such that even a specialist like Ólafur Halldórsson is induced to sigh: "Mansöngurinn er þesskonar líkingamál og rímhnoð sem tilgangslaut er að reyna að skýra"<sup>10</sup>. Hallgrímur, more than a century later, uses a much more discursive style, and in Sigurður the difference between mansöngr and narrative narrows even further.

<sup>10</sup> Vilm p. 187.

Mansöngur and conclusion form a bridge between the performance scene and the fictional scene: The performer announces the start of another session, identifies what is coming, says for whom he is performing, usually numbers the part and names the metre and often asks for silence. At the beginning of the work he may also say who commissioned it, and at the end he may identify the woman he dedicates it to and himself (usually, in a teasingly roundabout way reminiscent of cryptic crosswords). This is practical information for the audience easily explained by the oral performance situation, but it would seem that from an early stage the performer strove to hold the stage in his own name for a little longer at the beginning of each rima and to use the opportunity both to show off his poetic skills and to make personal remarks - whether genuine or pretended - before submitting to the slavery of the narrative.

Mansöngur means 'love song', and we know both from the sögur und from Grágás that the Icelandic community took a dim view of a man compromising a woman by making her the object of such a song; it seems to have been considered as libel, a sort of *níð*. The rímur convention is that composing and performing the work is a form of homage to a female in the audience, who is referred to under a variety of florid kennings but hardly ever by name except in the form of an anagram hidden away in the text. Otherwise the poet's language is often that of the hopeful or rejected lover, not unlike that of the courtly continental poet of the high middle ages, pleading for attention, expecting a reward, complaining about the beloved's indifference or his own loneliness. As in the case of the troubadour, these feelings were expressed in a public context, before an audience, not in private, and in this way may be as much a product of audience expectation as of a personal predicament, although in the case of more recent poets such as Sigurður, the lady may actually be identified.

Whether the poet as a pleading, unsuccessful lover owes his existence to European role models, or whether he was conceived in Iceland, possibly as a comic act, is hard to say; he is, however, the norm in the older rímur. In Vilm i, ii, iii, vii and xv, this is the main theme of the mansöngur, sometimes coupled with self-criticism for being a talker, not a doer, for having no practical experience (iii 3-4, vii, 1-4; ix 6), or blaming lack of success on age (i 4-5; iii 1-2; vii 2, 5-7, where he gives his age as 57; ix 2-3) or lack of poetic brilliance (i 6; ix 2-3; xi 3-5). But he also criticises men who use their verbal skill to fool girls (ix 5-9), commends the man who is discreet about his amorous bliss (iii 7), and praises the ideal woman in almost biblical terms (viii 3-8). In another passage, however, he says that a person is mad to honour women if he can never sleep with them (xiv 5). Much mansöngur space, in all the four cycles, is used to say why the poet cannot, or does not wish to, write mansöngur.

But despite the term 'mansöngur', even in Vilm the principal theme is not love but "I compose poetry". And the way the poet does it is not only using the mythological concepts of the divine origin of the mead of poetry but displaying a firework of kennings and metaphors that puts the profanum vulgus in its place. In all of iv, v, vi, xii and xvi, and in most of xi and xiii, this is the subject matter of the mansöngur. In v, vi and xii the (dwarves') boat is the dominant conceit, in xi and xiii brewing. The first and the last mansöngur give a veritable smörgásbord of metaphors; in i animals (1-2), liquid from the pen (2), the mead of poetry (3), grinding, sifting and baking (3-5), the dwarves' boat (6-8); in xvi the smithy (1-3, with Oden working the bellows), brewing (4), sounds and music (5). The smithy also appears in xi 4; in vi and xii the boat imagery is enriched with the mythology of love (in vi Frigg and the dwarf Frosti are to share a bed; in xii Venrix dygðin and afmors frygð go into the building of the boat), and in xii the boat's cargo is Oden's drink. The conclusions are less heavily weighed down with metaphorical language but they still carry a fair load: Oden's drinking-horn (i 82,

ii 66) or beer keg (xii 68) is empty, the mead of poetry (ii 89, xi 87-8), the dwarves drink (iii 76), Frosti's beer and flour (vi 73) are used up. The last conclusion provides a whole bouquet of metaphors: I have messed up Són's yeast (xvi 62), my purse of poetry is empty so I cannot feed songs any more, I have hammered together stiff ('blue-cold') verses for you (63), my poetry-talk in the land of consciousness will stop, I lock again the hall of verses (66).

Hallgrímur has the same elements, if in simpler language, but his emphasis is quite different. The tenor of his *mansöngur* passages is his lack of skill and practice; he repeatedly (KR i 9, iv 7 xi 4, xiii 86, LPM ii 7) asks his audience to correct or improve his verses, he deplores his ignorance of the (Prose) Edda (KR i 7, iv 2, vi 7, LPM i 6) - and what is worse, when he was shown an Edda text, he did not understand it (iv 5-7). The reason for these shortcomings are his youth (bernska KR xiii 86) and his stupidity (þursleg heimiska KR xii 9), and he asks the lady to accept his good intentions in lieu of achievement (KR ix 4, LPM iv 9). This ritual self-deprecation has certainly a literary tradition as *captatio benevolentiae*, but in his often stated dislike of the *mansöngur*, his unease with the metre *frumhent* (KR viii 8), his professed inability to follow the lady's request for a change of metre (ix 3-4 - he does, however, use a new metre in each *rímali*), his longing for simplicity (LPM i 8 *slétt og einfalt*, KR v 9 *einfalt rétt með orðin slétt*) and his suspicion that poets who 'myrkt kvæða' (KR v 3) exploit their audience's lack of expertise, have a ring of truth about it. He more than once (KR v 7, LPM iii 2) rejects formal virtuosity (*hagleikr*); contents (*efni*) are more important. He even once says that he is sick and tired of the whole enterprise (KR xii 2 *Leiðast tekur loksins mér þau ljóð að smíða*) - but goes on to say that it will not help a lazy person to just look at the work ahead of him.

While the framework of writing for a lady and hoping to be rewarded is kept, he does not launch into discussions of the relationship between poetry and sexuality except obliquely, by criticising those who use the divine gift of poetry to hurt their neighbours - they will be called to account for having wasted their talents in such a way (KR iii 3-6; cp. LPM vii 8-9). But he also defends himself against people who seem to have contested his moral right to write *mansöngur*, probably because of the suspected irregularity of his marriage (LPM vii 5-7). He, too, provides an extended picture of the ideal woman (LPM ii 3-6), with an explicit warning against garrulousness and sneering.

Hallgrímur does not appear to have shared some of the post-Reformation *rímur* poets' scruples about using pagan mythology. On the other hand, he does not hesitate to thank Christ in the *mansöngur* for having improved his condition (LPM vii 4), and he fills one whole *mansöngur* (LPM v) with a baroque sermon on the transitoriness of human life reminiscent of the *Passíusálmur*. The metaphorical language is much more restrained. Poetry is almost invariably presented, both in the *mansöngur* and in the conclusions, as a ship taken out of the boat-shed of brought to shore, or one that founders at the end of a *ríma* and has to be rebuilt at the beginning of a new *ríma*. Turning the metaphor into an extended conceit occurs only in KR xii; typically for him, it is a description of the *dilapidated* state or his ship of poetry. The only other metaphors for producing poetry are that of seed springing up (LPM vi 1 *Kvæða spréttur kornið smátt..*) and of a door turning on its hinges (LPM viii 6 *hurðin máls á hjörum snýst*). He is also more folksy in using proverbs and, once, a *Wellerism* (KR xi 7) - something his audience is likely to have recognised with pleasure. Once (KR x 79) he pays homage to tradition by turning a concluding stanza into a firework of rhymes, with every stressed syllable providing a rhyme. This is the sort of device Sigurður is quite fond of (*þhr* iv 51, vi 84, vii 70).

Sigurður Breiðfjörð lived in an age when disciples of the Enlightenment such as Magnus Stephensen already had criticised *rímur*, and an edict against *sögur* and



rimur had been issued as early as 1746 - these may be the 'nýju lög' he refers to in þhr iv 5, although it cannot have been half as effective as Jónas Hallgrímsson's denunciation of the genre (and Sigurður's *Rimur af Tístran og Indönu* in particular) 17 years later, in *Fjólnir*. He says he would not have taken to rimur if he had remembered that before. But that is probably a tongue-in-cheek remark, for he is very playful in his mansöngvar - playful concerning tradition, playful with his audience. A short conspectus of the contents of the mansöngvar in þhr may illustrate this.

In i he takes the metaphor 'mead of poetry' literally. Oden puts a little keg of it on the table, but the poet prefers the merchants' breðnnivin, and a gulp of that inspires him right away so he forswears Oden. In ii he recounts how he pretended to be not very interested when the girl asked him to compose a ríma cycle, while in reality he went crazy with happiness. Now he hopes to join the line of poets, even though only as the lowest limb of the tail. In iii he makes fun of the show of modesty rimur poets are fond of, e.g. by claiming that theirs is not the mead of poetry regurgitated (from the mouth) by Oden in eagle shape but ejected at the other end (e.g. KR x 4 dvel eg því við arnar stél). Sigurður claims that his girl would reject such birdshit; and he invokes Bacchus to help him produce something better. In iv, Oden (monsieur ásagramur) has no mead left - and even if he had, it would be no better than the horrible mixture the poet is served in real life; he finally invokes mighty Minerva. v takes up the cliché of the unhappy poet, feeling as if excluded when in love, with everybody putting obstacles in his way - and women's love being as flighty as aurora borealis. But then he suddenly stops in mid-track - is he, who is so fond of women, going to criticise them? He hastens to apologise to the girl the ríma is written for. In this mansöngur he also addresses Ormr, a character not yet introduced in the story but one who takes an unhappy end. In vi the conceit of the dwarves' ship is taken up. Should he take Þórður (the story's protagonist) on board? There are so many other farmers wanting a ride (saga: "Nú verðr at nefna fleiri menn til sögunnar"<sup>11</sup>) - he will take them on for the time being and throw them out when the time comes. Up with the sail, Austril I am taking the helm. The traditional motif in vii is the poet's adversities - not enough time and quiet to write, personal misfortunes. In Sigurður's case, it is the imminent separation from his lady that threatens to depress him; but creating joy and entertainment in times of worry is better than riches (something of a cliché in mansöngur comments). In viii he again blends the performance scene with the scene of fiction: What woman will Þórður be able to enjoy on earth? (at that point of the story, he is living in the household of an unworthy older husband of a young wife). The poet would have been assured of a happy married life for Þórður in heaven, but now a clergyman has claimed that there will be no such thing. The poet refuses to spy and speculate on intimate details (motif love/women's favour). ix must have the shortest mansöngur in rimur history, a paltry three stanzas with the barest information about that ríma's properties, as if to prove that against all precedent, you can come to the point of the story right away. The mansöngur of the last ríma, x, is a variation on the "I compose poetry" theme, namely a review of his rimur production up to that point, 116 rimur in 20 cycles, with titles given; he also vows not to write any more. At the conclusion of his work he asks the audience to leave quickly because he still has to talk to his girl. He then asks her, Guðrún, for a kiss for his trouble but stops himself because people might be listening.

This bare summary, probably, only conveys Sigurður's play with the rimur conventions, not that with his audience. The conclusion is one indication - his pretending that the listeners have left when in reality they are all still sitting there. By inner monologues and sudden outbreaks he makes them accomplices of

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a created private persona; he anticipates interjections, asks the men to be quiet but then remembers he is not singing for them but for one particular woman. His playful mixing of fictional stage and performance stage, once even in the narrative, has been stressed as an almost constant feature. It is romantic irony in a place and at a time when Romanticism cannot have made an impact yet. The whole performance amounts to a puckish game with the audience by an author who could take neither literary conventions nor himself (in the poet's role) quite seriously.

Lars Lönnroth was right in speaking of 'den dubbla scenen', for oral performance is not a contrast of fictional world against the 'reality' of the performing situation but an artist acting on two stages, as a creator of a fictional world and a performer taking on a variety of roles: in the *mansöngur* as announcer, demonstrator, dazzler, interlocutor, moralist. He was an heir to two traditions: skaldic poetry with its stereotyped contents and its emphasis on style and form, an oral tradition with a performer and a live audience; and the saga tradition, largely free in style and form and with its emphasis on the contents. The saga tradition, too, was an oral form once, but the very act of fixing it in writing must have 'depersonalised' it as far as authorial presence is concerned. In skaldic poetry the authorial presence could not disappear because it was preserved by formal constraints; in the free prose form, nothing prevented the 'ephemeral' features of performance from vanishing. It still happens today: A speaker at a conference may do a certain amount of improvisation geared to the occasion, to the audience, to what has happened at the conference before his talk. But even if he writes down these performance-oriented features in his typescript, they are unlikely to appear in the volume of published papers. The saga narrator must have referred to his audience, to the place, to topical events in a performance situation just as certain forms of theatre do; these references must have disappeared in the very act of writing down the saga. In skaldic poetry and in *rímur* they could not be improvised, or only by the exceptional virtuoso; rather, the network of performer/audience relations was written into the text and preserved, as occasional references in the *sögurs' lausavísur* must have been, by its strict form, whether occurring in the *mansöngur* or the narrative. It is true that at times *rímur* were copied in manuscript without the *mansöngvar*; but this is unlikely to have happened in performance, where a warm-up period and a bridge between reality and fiction was needed. A bridge, however, which also set an Ormur, Hallgrímur or Sigurður in his role as poet and performer firmly apart from the Ormur, Hallgrímur or Sigurður of normal daily intercourse.