

## TROUBLESOME POETS AT THE COURTS OF SCANDINAVIA

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### I INTRODUCTION

Auðs hef'k illrar tíðar alldrengila fengit, (mik hefr gjöllu gulli gramr ok jarl of framðan), ef glapskyldir gjalda - gjalfreiteigs ok hef'k eigi mörk - fyr minstan verka matvísium skal'k Grísi.	Wealth I have at an evil time most worthily gained (with jingling gold have king and earl ennobled me) if I have to pay - and cannot possess the tree of the wide ocean [woman] - for a scrap of verse a fool's fine to the gourmet Gríss.
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(*Hallfreðar saga* v. 29)<sup>1</sup>

With these words, Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld voices his indignation against the judgement that he should give his rival Gríss an item of great value (*gríp einn góðan*) in recompense for his slanderous *Gríssvísur*. The verse draws together three of the main strands in the hero's experiences as depicted in *Hallfreðar saga*: love, male rivalry, and the service of royal patrons; and these three, together with religious conversion, are also the main topics for poetic composition in the saga. Hallfreðr's rueful observation that some poetry wins reward and honour, while some incurs a fine is also suggestive of the very different social functions and effects of poetry composed by Icelanders at home and abroad: the one (to generalise somewhat) socially disruptive, the other socially cohesive. One is reminded of the sharply contrasting attitudes to Þórðr Kolbeinsson reported at the start of *Bjarnar saga Hítacelakappja*:

Hann var skáld mikit ok helt sér mjök fram til virðingar; var hann jafnan útanlands vel virðr af meira háttar monnum sakar menntanar sinnar ... Ekki var Þórðr mjök vinsæll af alþýðu, því at hann þótti vera spottsamr ok grár við alla þá, er honum þótti dælt við.

Hallfreðr has a nickname, unique to him,<sup>2</sup> and, according to his saga, conferred in a mood of exasperated admiration by King Ólafr Tryggvason after the newly baptised Hallfreðr has persuaded the king to hear his encomium (*drápa*), by threatening to abandon the new doctrine - which he considers not more poetic (*skáldlegri*) than the poem - if he does not (ch. 6). But Hallfreðr's nickname also encapsulates his whole nature and experience,<sup>3</sup> by linking the dominant traits of difficulty and skaldship; and of course all the poet-protagonists of the *skáldasögur* are famously troublesome. My purpose in the following brief investigation is to consider to what extent the trouble caused by the personalities and verse-making of the skalds at home in Iceland extends to their visits to the Nordic courts, and how the court appearances and court poetry relate to the theme of frustrated love in this group of sagas. The focus will be especially on the eponymous heroes of *Gunnlaugs saga*, *Hallfreðar saga*,

<sup>1</sup> The version of *Hallfreðar saga* discussed and cited is the *Möðruvallabók* text, unless otherwise specified. See 'References' for editions of this and other sagas cited.

<sup>2</sup> His son Hallfreðr is also said to have been called *vandræðaskáld* (*Hallfreðar saga* ch. 11), though no tradition of poetry, or difficulty, or indeed of anything else, attaches to him.

<sup>3</sup> As emphasised by Andersson, 1968, 234, and Wright 1973.

*Kormáks saga*, and *Bjarnar saga Hítödlakappa*.<sup>4</sup> The discussion will be concerned mainly with the skalds' lives as imaginatively reconstructed in the sagas, rather than with historical actuality, and it will remain agnostic as to the authenticity or otherwise of the verses attributed to the skalds in these sagas.

## II TROUBLESOME POETS

The potent force of poetic composition in the early Nordic world can be directed to both positive and negative ends, making or breaking reputations, and putting various slants on events and issues. Laudatory poetry addressed to rulers in the Scandinavian homelands can secure favour, reward and lasting fame for its makers, and can even save lives, if sycophantic enough, as the various *höfuðlausn* 'head-ransom' narratives show. For Icelandic skalds at home, meanwhile, the effect of poetry can be quite the opposite. *Níð* (versified insult) and *mansöngur* (love-lyric, verse about women), while inventive, vigorous and often more compelling than the court poetry, bring conflict to a community, fines and sometimes death, as when Björn Hítödlakappi, himself a master of poetic invective, kills Þorkell Dálksson for reciting the *Kolluvísur*. None is quoted, but one is reminded of v. 19 of *Bjarnar saga*, which portrays Björn groping with his hand up the rump of a cow to deliver a calf, and which cost its composer Þórðr Kolbeinsson the stupendous fine of one hundred in silver.

Correspondingly, the practitioners of poetry are seen as odd and dangerous, where their verbal dynamism is not suitably harnessed. The protagonists of the *skáldasögur* are characterised as able, striking if flawed in appearance, yet perverse, even in the view of their nearest and dearest. Kormákr the headstrong - *óðlátur* and *óðlundaðr* - is possibly the best example. These words are used by Miðfjarðar-Skeggi as he tries to explain to Kormákr that he is too impetuous to wield the magic sword *Sköfnungur* successfully (ch. 9), and when Kormákr returns two chapters later, making petulant verses about the sword he has misused, the notches in the sword and his hand are eloquent emblems of his own pig-headedness. The *óð-* adjectives are also fittingly suggestive of the association between fury, divinity and poetry,<sup>5</sup> just as Kormákr's verses frequently allude to the myth of poetry as the gift of Óðinn,<sup>6</sup> and exult in its power, as for instance in v. 52 and again in v. 65, where Kormákr brags that he will *níða* the *Skíðingar* till stones float.

In *Hallfreðar saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga*, the heroes' temperamental awkwardness is explicitly linked to poetry in their introductory sketches. Hallfreðr is *skáld ... gótt ok heldr níðskár ok margbreytinn* (ch. 2), while Gunnlaugr is similarly (and probably in imitation) introduced as obstreperous, ambitious and unyielding, *skáld mikit ok heldr níðskár, ok kallaðr Gunnlaugr orms tunga* (ch. 4). His more popular brother Hermundr acts as a foil to him, as does, partially, Gunnlaugr's rival Hrafn, who is handsome, widely respected

<sup>4</sup> Space does not permit a discussion of the generic characteristics of the *skáldasögur*, nor consideration of the 'outliers' *Egils saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga*; see Clunies Ross (forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> See de Vries 1977, s.vv. *Óðinn* and *óðr*.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. in *Kormáks saga* v. 23, where Kormákr refers to himself as *beiðir ... valkjósanda ... vins* 'offerer of the wine of the chooser of the slain'. Further examples are in vv. 42 (attributed to Steinarr), 67 and 68. The Odinic qualities of the 'skald persona' in the sagas - most prominent in the case of Egill Skallagrímsson - are explored in Clunies Ross 1978 and in Dronke 1978, 24-26.

and *háðvarr* (v. 11) - possibly 'reluctant to use verse for insult'<sup>7</sup> - and who thus affords a reminder that poetic talent is not necessarily attended by a refractory nature. Gunnlaugr's nickname 'serpent-tongue' may be shared with his great-grandfather,<sup>8</sup> also Gunnlaugr, but as the skald himself says, it was given for a reason (*þat fekksk nafn af nækkvi ... mér ungunum*, v. 4), and it is fitting for the protagonist of a saga which, more even than most, is preoccupied with the power of language.<sup>9</sup>

Björn Arngeirsson, before he becomes 'Hítðœlakappi', is an exception to these patterns: a handsome and thoroughly admirable character at his first appearance in his saga. The capacity for making acerbic poetry is, as it were, at first displaced onto his enemy Þórðr Kolbeinsson (introduced above), and only emerges later under pressure of circumstances.

The reasons why these verbally and sexually alert young men go abroad are complex. A trip overseas can, if things go well, give these restless characters the space they need, away from the simmering troubles of a close neighbourhood. Hallfreðr is sent abroad by his father to get him out of trouble's way, and Kormákr's departure springs from his frustration at the demeaning *hólmanga* with Bersi (ch. 11). More positively, meanwhile, fame, fortune and instant kudos on return are strong lures, and Björn Arngeirsson's first voyage out is clearly undertaken in quest of these, and with the warm encouragement of kinsmen who recognise his promise. His adventures, more fabulous and far-travelling than most in the *skáldasögur*, earn him the enduring name of champion, (Hítðœla)kappi. Often, however, it is precisely the voyage abroad, and not mere bad luck or temperamental perversity, which gives rise to the unhappy fates of these skalds. Gunnlaugr, the classic case and representative of young Icelanders of poetic talent and ambition, wants to go abroad - indeed has to go abroad to make his way by putting word and sword in the service of royal patrons - but also to have *Helga*. The otherwise well-disposed Þorsteinn Egilsson, echoed by Gunnlaugr's own father, indignantly points out the incompatibility of these desires, and twice calls him 'unsettled' (*óráðinn*). And indeed, for Gunnlaugr as well as for Björn Hítðœlakappi it is absence abroad which provides the opportunity for the rival to step in (*Gunnlaugs saga* ch. 5; *Bjarnar saga* ch. 5).

### III SKALDS AT COURT

How then, do these difficult characters fare when they arrive at the courts of Scandinavia? It is as well, perhaps, to begin with *Gunnlaugs saga*, since it is famously (and for some critics problematically)<sup>10</sup> rich in court visits whose depictions range exuberantly through a whole range of stereotypes for the Icelander at court. Gunnlaugr first presents himself, eighteen years old and unprepared with praise, to Einíkr jarl Hákonarson in Hlaðir (ch. 6). Gunnlaugr is not in the mould of a country bumpkin such as the *þátrr* hero Hreiðarr inn heimski, though like him he turns up at court in homespun breeches and

<sup>7</sup> Foote and Quirk, 1957, 25, n. 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Gunnlaugs saga* ch. 4; *Landnámabók* ch. 15 and ch. 43 (*Sturlubók*).

<sup>9</sup> See de Looze 1986, esp. 493: 'The lesson of *Gunnlaugssaga ormstungu* is that there is an element of the serpent in every tongue'.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Andersson 1967, 127.

cloak,<sup>11</sup> nor is he portrayed as a gauche and ungainly consumer of suet and porridge (*mør* and *grautr*) such as Sneglu-Halli,<sup>12</sup> yet like him he is plain-speaking to a perilous degree. Responding to a jealous barb from the *hirðmaðr* Þórir, he directs a four-line *kviðlingr* against him, followed by a (prose) jibe at the jarl about his father's ignominious death. Gunnlaugr is, naturally, ejected from court, but his life is spared at the intercession of his countryman Skúli Þorsteinsson and, like other visitors to mainland Scandinavia (again most spectacularly Hreiðarr inn heimski), he comes to improve his manners and his standing.

Gunnlaugr's second court visit, to Aðalráðr in England, is in striking contrast. He arrives, armed with an almost idolatrously flattering poem,<sup>13</sup> and in return receives honour, a precious cloak and a position as *hirðmaðr* (ch. 7). The third visit is to Sigtryggr silkiskegg in Dublin, who, never before flattered with a poem, has to be dissuaded from giving Gunnlaugr the amusingly inflated reward of two ships for his *runhent* poem. Instead, Gunnlaugr receives a set of the king's clothes and an arm-ring worth one mark. The next two visits are also to relatively minor and peripheral courts, those of Sigurðr jarl Hlōðvisson in Orkney and Sigurðr jarl in Vestrgautland. At each a *flokkr* is well received and rewarded, and at Sigurðr's court Gunnlaugr reveals a strong suit in diplomacy when he produces a neat *dróttkvætt* stanza which ends a dispute (*mannjafnaðr*) between the supporters of Sigurðr jarl and Eiríkr jarl about the merits of the two jarls. This group of three visits in ch. 8 then contrasts, in the following chapter, with Gunnlaugr's appearance before Óláfr sænski, a big-time monarch who knows how to keep itinerant poets in their place. Óláfr is introduced with more of a genealogical fanfare than the other rulers in the saga, and when Gunnlaugr arrives offering a poem tells him to sit down first - *ekki er nú tóm til yfir kvæðum at sitja*. When a hearing is eventually granted, Gunnlaugr has to share the laurels with Hrafn, and the king clearly finds their rivalry petty. However, that rivalry produces an interesting scene in which the two poets pass unusually specific aesthetic judgements on each other's poetry,<sup>14</sup> including Gunnlaugr's incriminating jibe at Hrafn for composing a mere *flokkr* for so great a king.

This episode also feeds directly into the romantic plot, for Hrafn ends his friendship with Gunnlaugr on the grounds that he has tried to humiliate him, and vows he will pay him out with dishonour. His suit, on return to Iceland, for the hand of Gunnlaugr's beloved Helga is thus clearly motivated by professional spite; and in other ways, too, the roles of court poet and lover intertwine or collide within the plot. It is Gunnlaugr's loyalty, as a *hirðmaðr*, to

11 Þættir p. 149. The importance of fine dress at court is emphasised, for instance, in *Borvalds þáttir tásalda*, when the Norwegian Barðr inn digri is reluctant to approach Óláfr Tryggvason in outmoded clothes (Þættir p. 475).

12 Within *Sneglu-Halla þáttir*, King Haraldr Sigurðarson calls Icelanders self-willed and mannerless (*Eru þér einráðir Íslendingar ok ósiðblendnir*; Þættir p. 281).

13 The poem is possibly not quite so idolatrous as the text in *Skjaldedigtning* BI, 184, or the *Íslenzk Fornrit Gunnlaugs saga*, would suggest: *Herr sésk allr enn þrva í Englandis sem goð þengil* 'The whole host fears the liberal king of England like (a) God'. The mss., possibly corrupt, have not *goð þengil* but *zuds eingill / þeingils* (*Skjaldedigtning* AL, 194; the heading in *Skjaldedigtning* is 'Aðalsteinsdrápa').

14 Hrafn: 'Þetta er stórt kvæði, ok ófagrt ok nokkut stírkveðit, sem Gunnlaugr er sjálf r í skaplyndi'. Gunnlaugr: 'Þetta er fagrt kvæði, sem Hrafn er sjálf at sjá, ok yfirbragðslítt.'

King Aðalráðr (of which the king explicitly reminds him in ch. 10) that delays his return and spoils his chances with Helga,<sup>15</sup> though when he does eventually return, his desirability to Helga is enhanced as she wistfully admires him in the clothes given by King Sigtrygg and graciously accepts from him two longing verses and the cloak Aðalráðsnaut. It is this cloak at which she gazes as she dies in the arms of her second husband, the decent and understanding Þorkell (chs 11 and 13).

Gunnlaugr's final four court appearances, in chs 10 and 12, are repeat visits to Aðalráðr, Eiríkr jarl (twice), and Sigurðr jarl Hlǫðviðsson. In no case is poetry mentioned - Gunnlaugr goes raiding with Sigurðr and proves himself a most valiant fighter, and now the love triangle eclipses all other preoccupations. For the last two visits take place on a voyage abroad motivated solely by Gunnlaugr's desperation to settle things finally with Hrafn by duel, a recourse now illegal in Iceland. The saga, unusually, ends as it began, by focusing on the woman in the story.

As in the other *skáldasögur*, court poetry does not feature strongly in *Gunnlaugs saga*, yet in a saga so rich in court visits, and containing twenty-five verse quotations, it is natural that at least some is cited or referred to. As seen above, mention is made of *drápur* for King Aðalráðr, and for Óláfr sænski, another *drápa* in the *runhenda* metre for Sigtryggir silkiskegg, and, reflecting their lesser status, a *flokkr* each for the jarls of Orkney and Vestrgautland.<sup>16</sup> Of these, only the refrain or *stef* of the Aðalráðr *drápa* (v.3) and a *stef* and twelve further lines from the *drápu* for Sigtryggir (vv. 6-8) are cited. A further three verses, though not court poetry as such, were composed within a court setting. Verse 2 is directed against the jealous Þórir; v. 5 is a versified vow to visit three princes and two jarls, then v. 9 is Gunnlaugr's arbitration in the *mannjafnaðr* at the court of Sigurðr jarl. All the last sixteen verses in the saga, of which all but five are attributed to Gunnlaugr himself, arise from the yearning and conflict caused by Helga, though there is little pure love poetry, except for the lovely *Brámani skein brúna*, v. 20, celebrating the radiance from Helga's eyes, and almost no *níð*. Where Gunnlaugr and Hrafn answer verse with verse, they express defiance (vv. 17-18) or simply record (posthumously) their bloody last battle (vv. 23-24).

*Bjarnar saga Hítödlakappa*, infamously laden with *níð*, both verbal and visual, is set mainly in Iceland, where the neatly matched verbal volleys between Björn Hítödlakappi and Þórðr Kolbeinsson<sup>17</sup> interlace with the complex chain of physical conflicts to form the backbone of the saga. Both poets travel abroad, but only Þórðr is a court poet, and there is no court poetry among the thirty-nine verse quotations in the saga. Some is, however, reported. In ch. 3 Þórðr is said to compose a *drápu* for Eiríkr jarl Hákonarson

<sup>15</sup> Gunnlaugr claims in v. 16 that fighting for Aðalráðr delayed his return home, though the prose would suggest that he was in no hurry even after that.

<sup>16</sup> Gunnlaugr is listed in *Skáldatal* as a poet of Óláfr sænski, Eiríkr jarl Hákonarson and Aðalráðr king of England. No court poetry is preserved, beyond that quoted in *Gunnlaugs saga*. Hrafn Órundarson is also listed as composing for Óláfr sænski and Eiríkr jarl, but no court poetry attributed to him survives.

<sup>17</sup> E.g. in vv. 4 and 5, Þórðr's *Út skaltu ganga* is matched by Björn's retort, *Hér mun'k sitja*, with a refrain at vv. 14-15: *Út skaltu ganga ... Kyrr mun'k sitja*. In ch. 20, the *Grámagaflím*, with its grotesque account of Þórðr's conception, is answered by the *Kolluvisur*, and in ch. 23 Þórðr's *Daggeisla* about Björn's new wife is answered by the *Eykindilsátur* about Þórðr's wife Oddný, though nothing from the last three is quoted.

for which he is rewarded with a sword; in ch. 7 he makes a *drápa* for Óláfr Haraldsson, and is given a gold ring, a silk coat with lace trim, and a good sword.<sup>18</sup> Björn's good relations with these rulers, and with King Valdimarr of Russia and Knútr inn ríki in England, rest on his fine character and fighting prowess rather than on poetry. The beneficent influence of Óláfr helgi Haraldsson receives particular emphasis in the saga, as Björn, before even meeting him, foregoes revenge against his guest Þórðr (chs 7 and 9), and the king arbitrates between the two men (ch. 8).

In the saga of the celebrated court poet Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld, the worlds of home and abroad are largely separate. Hallfreðr's beloved Kolfinna is married to Gríss before he leaves Iceland; he thinks of her and composes about her as he embarks for his first voyage abroad (v. 4, ch. 5), and he makes a strophe about her with his dying breath, tossed on stormy waters in the Inner Hebrides (v. 33, ch. 11), but in between, uniquely among the heroes of the *skáldasögur*, he is sufficiently able to forget his Icelandic love to form a successful, though sadly short-lived, marriage abroad (ch. 8).<sup>19</sup> But the most remarkable feature of his adventures abroad is the extent to which they centre on the person of Óláfr Tryggvason,<sup>20</sup> even when the king is physically distant or deceased, and on the theme of Christian conversion. The awkward-natured skald is tested and half-tamed in ch. 6 by the gift of a sheathless sword and a difficult expedition to Þorleifr spaki, which is reluctantly undertaken as part of Óláfr's heavy-handed missionary programme. Hallfreðr's sojourn among the perilous paths of the heathen lands to the east is attended by the king's luck and the grace of 'White Christ', whom Hallfreðr invokes in the encounter with the bandit Qnundr (ch. 7), and is curtailed by a summons back to the Christian sovereign's fold (ch. 9). King Óláfr Tryggvason even seems to steer the only fully narrated visit Hallfreðr makes to a sovereign other than himself. Hallfreðr plans to assassinate Eiríkr jarl Hákonarson, presumably for his part in the confederacy which brought defeat and death to Óláfr Tryggvason in the battle at Svöld, but, advised by Óláfr in a dream, he abandons his plan in favour of composing in praise of Eiríkr. In a slightly bungled *höfuðlausn* narrative, the intervention of Þorleifr spaki and the making of a praise-poem save Hallfreðr's life (ch. 11).

King Óláfr does not merely provide alternative outlets for Hallfreðr's physical and emotional energy whilst overseas; his influence (in the form of posthumous teleporting) is so strong as to connect the otherwise separate worlds of home and abroad. Thus, on Hallfreðr's return to Iceland (chs 9-10), his re-kindled love for Kolfinna and *níð* against Gríss lead to the death of his brother Galti and an agreement to engage in a *hólmanga*, but after a dream appearance of Óláfr Tryggvason (the third of four) Hallfreðr gives up the duel,

<sup>18</sup> Þórðr Kolbeinsson appears in the *Skáldatal* lists as a poet of Óláfr helgi, Magnús Ólafsson (in the Uppsala ms. but not AM 761 4o), Eiríkr jarl Hákonarson, and Sveinn jarl Úlfsson. Two strophes and a half traditionally believed to be from *Belgskakadrápa* are preserved in *Heimskringla* and *Fagrskinna*, and thirteen a half from *Eiríksdrápa* in the sagas of Óláfr Tryggvason, *Knýtlinga saga* and *Snorra Edda*.

<sup>19</sup> Björn Hítöðlakappi, of course, marries the Icelandic woman Þordís, though the actual description of the marriage is missing from the saga as preserved.

<sup>20</sup> Remarkable, that is, in comparison with the other *skáldasögur*. Insofar as traditions about Hallfreðr must have flourished, at Þingeyrar and elsewhere, in close conjunction with those about Óláfr Tryggvason it is not remarkable.

and goes abroad once more, there to meet a non-violent death at sea which is followed by an end not a little touched by hagiography, as Hallfreðr's body is recovered (with the help of Óláfr Tryggvason) from a bog and buried in Iona Abbey, while the treasures given him by the king are made into a chalice and altar-cloth. Hallfreðr's near-sanctification, under the protection of a Christian king, hence presents a striking contrast to Gunnlaugr's sad and violent end, though it does find a modest parallel in the story of Björn Hítödelakappi.<sup>21</sup>

According to his saga, Hallfreðr visited, and composed for, five Scandinavian rulers: Hákon jarl (before whom he is said to perform a *drápa*, ch. 5), Óláfr Tryggvason (a *drápa*, ch. 6), Sigvaldi jarl (a *flokkr*, ch. 7), Óláfr Sviakonungr (a '*kvæði*', ch. 9), and Eiríkr jarl Hákonarson (a '*kvæði*', ch. 11).<sup>22</sup> With the massive exception of Hallfreðr's relationship with Óláfr Tryggvason, the descriptions of these visits are perfunctory, and although *Hallfreðar saga* in the Möðruvallabók text contains thirty-three verse quotations, only six lines are quoted from panegyrics - a half-strophe from the *erfidrápa* for Óláfr Tryggvason, and a couplet about Eiríkr jarl - and of these the four *erfidrápa* lines say as much about the poet as about the dedicatee, voicing the skald's grief at his death.<sup>23</sup> The remaining verses in the saga are all *lausavísur* and most are composed in Iceland, expressing love of Kolfinna, or animosity towards Gríss and his friend Már, who to some extent shares with Gríss the role of rival and target of *níð*. As already indicated, Hallfreðr's verse-making has disastrous consequences (including affront to the beloved) within the local community, and this theme is underlined by the fact that the Hallfreðr - Kolfinna pairing is echoed in the handsome Ingólfr Þorsteinsson's unwelcome poetic and personal attentions towards Hallfreðr's sister Valgerðr.<sup>24</sup>

Turning to *Kormáks saga*, it is not until ch. 18 that the skald and his brother Þorgils skarði go abroad, to the court of Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri, and the saga at this point turns into a somewhat featureless and general account of wars and adventures. In ch. 19, Haraldr gráfeldr comes to power, and the two brothers win his favour and fight for him in Ireland, sharing the honours in a great victory. But Kormákr's mind is always on Steingerðr, and Þorgils proves a convenient confidant. The King tries to dissuade Kormákr from going home to Iceland, but without success. Kormákr makes a second journey abroad, in ch. 24, which is most notable for his encounters with Steingerðr who, uniquely, has induced her second husband Þorvaldr tinteinn to take her abroad. The narrative, again vague, is now also rather unreal, containing

<sup>21</sup> Björn obtains, by a mix of accident and gift, *reimar* (thongs or cross-garters) belonging to Óláfr Haraldsson, and wears them to his dying day. They are later discovered, uncorrupt, and used for a belt in a set of mass vestments at Garðar church, Akranes (chs 9 and 32). No such legend attached to Gunnlaugr, though he does live long enough to be brought to Lifangr and given the last rites (ch. 12).

<sup>22</sup> Hallfreðr's twelfth-century successor Hallar-Steinn recalled that Hallfreðr, *hróðar gjarn*, had composed a *drápa* for Óláfr, and *Skáldatal* names Hallfreðr among the poets of Eiríkr jarl Hákonarson and Óláfr Tryggvason. Outside *Hallfreðar saga*, twenty-eight strophes and ten half-strophes are preserved from (two?) poems for Óláfr Tryggvason in the sagas about him, while a further nine half-strophes in *Snorra Edda* have been taken to belong to a *Hákonardrápa*.

<sup>23</sup> The lines are missing from the version of the saga in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta*.

<sup>24</sup> In the Möðruvallabók version, the Ingólfr-Valgerðr episode precedes that of Hallfreðr and Kolfinna; in the *Óláfs saga* version in AM 61 fol. etc., it follows.

some cartoonish action in chs 24-26, including two rescues of Steingerðr from pirates. King Haraldr has to mediate between the parties, solemnly arbitrating over the four kisses Kormákr has stolen from Steingerðr, and comments that they are difficult to look after. Kormákr's relations with him are not a particular focus of interest, although he is restored to favour and accompanies the king on an expedition to Bjarmaland, and indeed, the adventures abroad provide little distraction from Kormákr's doomed and obsessive love; they serve rather to show how inescapable the obsession was.

There is, correspondingly, no reference whatsoever to court poetry in *Kormáks saga*, and none is quoted among the eighty-five verses incorporated in the saga. These, like the prose, focus mainly on the fatal love-triangle and its ramifications; they are attributed mainly to Kormákr himself and contain some of the best erotic lyricism in early Icelandic, as well as expressions of disdain, defiance and aggression. <sup>25</sup> *Kormáks saga* thus seems deliberately to ignore the fact that Kormákr was a court poet. <sup>26</sup>

#### IV COURT POETRY IN THE SKALDASÖGUR

If the various sagas of skalds vary widely in their treatment of the theme of the skald at court, they agree in their reluctance to cite substantially from court poetry, and it is worth pausing to consider the reasons why this should be. In order to do so, it is necessary to look first at the *lausavísur* which so strongly predominate in these sagas. These are by definition of the moment, on the spot. They purport, at least, to be the words of the characters, usually uttered in the midst of dramatic situations. They are often part of dialogue, and indeed in many dialogic scenes audience and occasion (verbal or physical cues) for the verse seem to have been deliberately manufactured, as when Hallfreðr's verse report of his fight with Önundr, vague though it is, is presented as an answer to Ingibjörg's queries in ch. 8. The special quality of speeches in verse is marked by introductory tags such as 'N. kvað (*vísu*)', although quite often a versified speech is not explicitly recognised as such by the skald's interlocutors.

Within the *lausavísur*, there is a great temporal range - past, present, future - but on the whole they give a strong sense of immediacy, which is (to illustrate from *Hallfreðar saga*) achieved by the large numbers of present tense verbs, imperatives, future-forming auxiliaries such as *skal* (v. 23), *skyli*, *vil'k* (v. 12), and *mun* (v. 20); first person pronouns (*passim*); conditional conjunctions such as *ef* (vv. 22, 23); and adverbs such as *nú* (v. 4) and *hér* (v. 6). This temporal immediacy is matched by emotional intensity. Illustrating again from *Hallfreðar saga*, even the normally non-verbal Gríss is given a verse (v. 25) whose intertwining clauses magnificently capture his shifting feelings of pity for his swollen-eyed Kolfinna, mingled with suspicion and anger, while many more verses reveal the feelings of Hallfreðr.

The fact that court poetry differs from *lausavísur* in practically all of these features doubtless helps to explain its near-absence from the *skáldasögur*. It tends to be retrospective, lacking in the temporal and emotional immediacy of

<sup>25</sup> Fifteen verses are spoken by Hólmǫngu-Bersi (mainly bragging about this fighting prowess), and small scraps are attributed to Steingerðr and Þorvaldr tinteinn.

<sup>26</sup> Kormákr is said in *Skáldatal* to have composed for Haraldr gráfeldr and Sigurðr Hlaðajarl. Six half-strophes which have been associated with *Sigurðardrápa* are preserved in *Snorra Edda*, and one whole strophe in *Heimskringla*.



the *lausavísur*, and it is establishment poetry. Clearly, too, because its main focus is rulers and their deeds, it would, if highlighted, distract from the figure of the poet and from the tensions and conflicts that are the stuff of these sagas. Certainly it is noticeable that in *Hallfreðar saga* the only extensively quoted poetry from Hallfreðr's stay at the court of his liege Óláfr Tryggvason is that voicing the religious torment he experiences at his conversion.<sup>27</sup> A later poetic venture was the *Uppreistardrápa* - probably a poem about Creation - which Hallfreðr is said to have composed in order to make amends for his sojourn among pagans. This, if it ever existed,<sup>28</sup> must have been rather straightforward and orthodox; none of it is cited. One might, finally, also wonder whether court poetry is rarely quoted because its association with narratives of a more serious historical intent would raise the wrong kind of expectations. Perhaps the *lausavísur*, signalled by the *þá kvað* introductory tag, were recognised to be, at least in part, imaginative projections into the mouths of their speakers.

If actual citations from court poetry are sparse in the *skáldasögur*, and the importance of its production and performance patchily represented, there remains a more oblique way in which the norms of court poetry may make their presence felt in the *skáldasögur*. I am thinking here of the way in which *níðsúsir* play on the conventions of court poetry, often by the inversion of heroic and aristocratic norms in the portrayal of the subject, whereby, for instance, gross gluttony replaces regal generosity (e.g. *matvísun Grísi, mjógir mǫrou* or *ætnu eyðir*, *Hallfreðar saga* v. 29, *Bjarnar saga* vv. 18 and 21 respectively), and cur-like cowardice replaces power and valour. Sometimes conventional 'man' kennings refer to a male rival as a bearer (tree or god) of weapons or as a giver or bearer of gold without any apparent trace of irony; but equally they can be transformed into insults either through the irony of their context - a 'treasure-giver' or 'wielder of weapons' acts like a coward and a churl (e.g. *Bjarnar saga* vv. 19 and 32) - or through the use of humorously ignominious fillers in normally honorific kenning patterns, so that the subject is given the attributes of the peasant. Hallfreðr's rival Gríss is twice depicted as a scythe-pusher (*orfa stríðir*, v. 19, and *orftægir*, v. 20), and similarly, though now not in kenning form, Þórðr Kolbeinsson is referred to in *Bjarnar saga* v. 21 as one who looks after draught beasts - *hinn's of eyki annast*. V. 20 juxtaposes Gríss's success as a farmer with a taunt about keeping (or not keeping) hold of the woman (Kolfinna), and the choice of details - a big milking-shed and a long sheep-pen (*stoðul víðan ... ok kvi langa*) - presumably suggests mock-admiration for Gríss's genital equipment (cp. the sexual disparagement in v. 19).

In taking women as a poetic theme, the *lausavísur* of the *skáldasögur* as it were make up a deficit in the court poetry, where women feature little, and mainly as the (often imaginary) auditors of encomiastic verses (Frank 1988). The women who are the object of the male rivalry are presented in the *lausavísur* with courtly finesse as the goddesses, bearers or props of lace, fine

<sup>27</sup> The 'sword' verse (v. 14) does not come under this heading, but in the context of the saga, it marks the restoration of good relations with Óláfr.

<sup>28</sup> There is a suspicious similarity between this narrative and that of Sigvatr's lost *Uppreistardrápa*, which, according to the *þáttir* about him, arose by means of a dream intervention by the other holy Óláfr, Haraldsson, who appeared to Sigvatr, telling him to inlay his *erfidrápa* for him with the *Uppreistarsaga* rather than with the story of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, as planned (*Þáttir* pp. 248-49).

fabrics or jewellery. Hallfræðr's Kolfinna is one such, and she is introduced in the saga as a lover of finery (*oflátí mikill*, ch. 2). Kormákr sends a verse to a goddess in Svínadalr: v. 77 *Vísu munk ... senda sgrva Rindí í til Svínadals mína*, hence implying the gross unsuitability of Þorvaldr to have her, and in v. 51 more explicitly deplors the fact that the pine-tree of gold lace (*gullklæðs geymipellá*) is married off to the tin-smith (*tindrátar manni*). His hyperbolic valuations of Steingerðr put her in an international class (v. 8). By these means the love-lorn skalds manage to imply (notwithstanding the stereotyped nature of these kennings)<sup>29</sup> that they, with their ladies, inhabit a courtly world closed to the labouring and lumbering spouses; one recalls here the brilliant contrast made by Hallfræðr between the sweaty and graceless Gríss approaching the marital bed like a herring-stuffed fulmar and the beautiful Kolfinna, downcast and swan-like (vv. 18-19).

## E. CONCLUSION

The presentation of skalds' relations with Scandinavian rulers is among the factors which most strongly differentiate the *skáldasögur* one from the other, affecting the whole dynamic of plot and theme. In *Kormáks saga*, visits to court come a very poor second in the preoccupations of the author and his central character, who, though a known eulogist, is not so portrayed. Potentially exciting events are played down, and fail to distract Kormákr from his hopeless love for Steingerðr. In *Bjarnar saga* the adventures abroad are colourfully delineated, but still subordinated to the rivalry between the two men, and the eponymous hero is not a court poet, though his rival Þórðr's standing at court is in implausibly sharp contrast to his craven and shabby behaviour towards Björn. At the other extreme, the first part of *Gunnlaugs saga* is virtually a 'mirror for prince-pleasers', although the court appearances dwindle in significance as the tragic love-story gathers momentum, while in *Hallfræðar saga*, the ethical and emotional influence of a single royal patron is shown to be so powerful that it not only determines much of the hero's activity abroad but also reaches into the potentially fatal situation in Iceland, averting the duel between the male rivals.

Some generalisations can nevertheless be made. The protagonists of the *skáldasögur* typically combine restless energy with self-will and a stubborn fidelity to persons or ideals, but repeatedly we see the troublesomeness of the skalds at home in Iceland qualified, even reversed or redeemed, as they win wealth, honour and personal fulfilment in their adventures under the patronage of Scandinavian rulers. There is still conflict and violence, of course, but the skalds act mainly in self-defence, as witness Hallfræðr's dealings with Óttarr and Kálfr, Önundr and Björn (*Hallfræðar saga* chs 6-8), or Gunnlaugr's with the robber Þórorrnr (*Gunnlaugs saga* ch. 7); and the potent and poisonous verse-making which causes such turbulence in a local Icelandic context is either silenced or put to more acceptable purposes once the skald is abroad. That little court poetry is quoted is unsurprising - it is too prince-focussed, too 'establishment, and would distract from the more interesting tensions in the life and personality of the poets. It is perhaps also too historical. Nevertheless, such quotations as there are from court poetry, together with the play of the *níðvísur* and *mansöngur* on courtly conventions, are reminders first of the sheer power of poetry (and therefore poets) to praise as

<sup>29</sup> See Meissner 1921, 399-421 for 'woman' kennings.

well as to blame, and second of the skald's view of himself as an accomplished and well-travelled champion who belongs in the same decorous world as the lady he longs for, while his opponent is a boorish and cowardly peasant. Up to a point, this view is confirmed by the overall prose narratives, which allow a touch of cosmopolitan glamour to the skald-heroes, while the husbands, whether decent or duplicitous, are portrayed essentially as stay-at-homes. Overall there seems to be a clear implication that the skalds, with their verbal potency and unruly temperaments, fare better in a wider world, perhaps especially if under the protection of Christian kings. Their lives would have been more successful, but far less fascinating, if in pursuing their careers abroad they had been able to let go of the women left behind in Iceland.

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