

Roberta Frank

Málsháttakvæði: A Norse Poem from Medieval Orkney

..... is silent.
what any one person says can be denied.
.....
..... only deceives somewhat less.
I intend to bring old sayings together.
Most people take pleasure in something.
This nonsense shows my good cheer.
It is then as if one gathers pickings.

I have not gone in for lampoons.
Full well would I have had excuse for that.
I can compose more rudely than you'd expect.
Everyone seems to know it.
I would not be robbed of my patrimony,
even if I should always speak bluntly.
One has to row first toward the nearest ness.
I would have some pedigree for that.

The world learns all that three people know.
They behave worse who break sworn pledges.
I'm not aiming that at any one person.
Many in turn have experienced its truth.
Angry words shall be found here.
I have the right to speak mouthfuls about that –
she rather managed to look after herself,
the wise-eyed woman – how she treated me.

Men should give rest to their wrath.
Often a very little thing occasions strife.
A dog is shaped for barking.
I intend to make my speech lighthearted.
Something worse had been in my mind.
It was almost like the pain of a boil.
The living man always rejoices in a cow.
It is clear that I am cheering up now.

It takes very little to amuse the young.
Life seems dreary to one alone.
To love another's child is to cherish a wolf.
Desperately would the blind wish to see.

People say a lord's word is precious.
Dragons often rise up on their tail.
A prince should be especially brave.
A frog can croak in the marshes.

One shall have a prince for glory.
We ought to hear of a bird of prey from far off.
Spears give strength to a jarl.
Outer skerries are washed by waves.
Many offer harm to another.
Snakes crawl from their slough in spring.
He behaves well who lets it pass by.
A bear and his kind have long nights.

Bjarki had a fierce corn of courage [=heart].
Starkaðr felled a great troop.
(He was not gentle in repose.)
Hrómundr seemed bold and cunning.
(No one made him give way.)
Eljárnir was loyal and brave.
He conquered the elephant in the phalanx.
That test of manhood seemed very tough.

They determined to face death well.
Brandingi slept at last in hell.
Mardoll's weeping was glittering.
That person gladdens who is often happy.
Ásmundr accustomed Gnóð to the sea.
Þjazi's own speech was gold.
Niðjungr scraped a horn from the mound.
This is exceedingly old lore now.

That was a shock about Frigg's son.
He was reckoned from a great family.
Hermóðr wanted to extend his life.
Éljúðnir had swallowed up Baldr.
They all wept for him.
Their laughter-ban [=grief] grew.
The story about him is very well known.
No need for me to harp on it.

To each his own pain seems the sorest.
It takes two to arrange a reconciliation.
Often a mediator is brought in as a third.

Equally trustworthy must he be to both sides.
No one passes sentence on himself.
(I suppose such will happen to me now.)
Though all the troop of men go bristling,
No one allows that he caused it first.

Poetry has to be fitted with refrains
(I have an abrupt manner in this verse)
else it shall seem a rigmarole,
almost as if I were grabbing at crumbs.
It wasn't a plague in the old days.
Still, the Lappish girl drove Haraldr out of his mind.
To him she seemed bright as the sun.
Many a man has experience of such now.

Men say the ship's sailyards are short.
The heart of magnates seems grey.
The tongue plays with the aching tooth.
One scarcely walks on ice in spring.
Very few are sufficient in themselves.
It helps not though the slow hasten.
Each man could gain stature from his company.
I recognize fully how sorrow goes.

One vies in strength least against the sea.
Sorli burst from great longing.
At times coastal waters resound in a calm.
It hardly matters that I prevail but little.
To many a man wealth seems good enough.
Of short sharpness is the soft scythe.
The whole poem shall be really weird.
A king's morning is always long.

Men often let things be hastily seen.
He whose hand is generous prospers.
Very many a man is too slow to calm down.
We judge counsels as they turn out.
It wasn't a plague in the old days.
Still, the Lappish girl drove Haraldr out of his mind.
To him she seemed bright as the sun.
Many a man has experience of such now.

A single man seems to himself rich everywhere.
Many a one speaks about the conduct of another.

We seek longest after the flawless.
Peaceable company seems the best.
Everything beyond the mean seems short-lived.
Not much is worse than a troll.
Nothing spoils the talk of a wise man.
I have not heard that [a polar bear freezes].

No one needs to fear threats.
Rather often does something touch a sore foot.
.....
A busybody conducts another's suit.
At home each man is something of a king.
.....
In no way do I speak about it the less.
Words travel as soon as they leave the mouth.

All seems hardly as it is
to those men afflicted by eye-disease.
Not only in the beautiful is there gain.
That shall be found the longer it is tested.
It wasn't a plague in the old days.
Still, the Lappish girl drove Haraldr out of his mind.
To him she seemed bright as the sun.
Many a man has experience of such now.

It seems best to live with resources.
The vixen proved cunning to the old ewe.
Many tricks she knew for herself.
So indeed Rannveig showed herself to me.
He behaves badly who betrays another.
One's lot is not known until vengeance ends.
The glory of the wedding feast seems quickly won.
Exceedingly long is every man the same.

Hair's flaws [from a poor cut] seem of short duration.
We call the name of an expedition 'glorious'.
I scarcely declare the one who warns to be at fault.
Men there are who end up high and dry.
Misfortune is quick in its preparations.
Snowstorms seem ugly to many.
No one avoids all sudden gusts.
People always ask about conclusions.

Some men are so blinded by love

that they seem to heed very little.
So it is said in a love-song:
it has deceived many wise men.
It wasn't a plague in the old days.
Still, the Lappish girl drove Haraldr out of his mind.
To him she seemed bright as the sun.
Many a man has experience of such now.

None puts his love up for sale.
Very often sleet makes for cold weather.
Memories of the dead fade fast.
One should buy a lean horse.
Woe seems tangible enough.
Friendships are unequal then.
A fetter was laid on Fenrir.
I was told it was hugely strong.

The good man should be guileless.
Gizurr proved guilty of slander.
He wanted to incite kings against each other.
I have no delight in gloom.
I would like to be able to avoid snares.
I think the wary man seldom stumbles.
He behaves well who tends his own.
Black-flecked is my poem.

The more powerful always offers advice.
Valiant men give raw meat to eagles.
Only up is the young man's path.
No person is at once fully grown.
There is expectation of a fall from an old tree.
More seems good than may be.
The blemish of another is more easily seen.
No one goes beyond his fated day.

No one bemoans another's misfortune.
(I never rein in my mouth.)
I hear tell that the world is turning.
Only some, I think, will believe me.
Life is difficult for him who poorly understands.
One needs not lament anyone.
The thought has thus lodged itself in my mind:
With long-lasting storms shall the earth be laid waste.

Seldom is a doomed man's ice-hole found frozen.
Women are chosen at drinking parties.
That has been clear to me for a long time.
Many a one has little in his power.
It is related how a noseless person languishes.
Now comes something that no one expects.
It were far better that I should be silent.
Each gets what he deserves in the end.

The badly behaved never loses his touch.
First one, then another, gets the short stick.
Unequal are the mouthfuls of a blind man.
We call grief bad for the complexion.
An oak has what is scraped from others.
Not much is slyer than a fox.
A torrent always up-ends things.
Easily grasped are the crimes of a hog.

The gold-serpent has for itself a burning-hot den.
The sun shines brightest in a cloudless sky.
Glass seems wondrously transparent.
The wave falls roaring over the skerry.
All rivers yearn to run to the sea.
Nothing is worse for a person than longing.
I strongly advise prior caution.
Most will spare themselves something.

What has passed can be related.
He does better who soothes another.
I know not for certain what can happen.
It is easiest to lead astray a foolish man.
One can scarcely trust the deceitful.
One should turn the better toward oneself.
One shall console the man who has suffered sorrow.
Exceedingly much is decreed about most.

They search in my mouth for words.
The chatter is well known to me.
Who shall possess Óðinn's mead [= the poem]
seems unclear to the race of men.
That inquiry will be of no use.
I very much have a mind for 'refuse'.
Not at all was this 'release' poor.

Now each who wants it shall have it.

I have thrown together without rudder
as I wished . . .

Rianur Jónsson's normalized text

1. ... þegir:
della að þess er einn hvern
...
2. Ekki heik me' flintun snall,
fullvel, attek til þess vætt,
lyrja kann ek efna vætt,
vita þykkir þat með þess hætt;
eðst ver mér ekki de átt
jafnan þátt ek kvæðu eðst;
róa veðr fyr til egn meða;

3. Þess vegna átt þess þess
þess þess vætt, er þess þess
ekki er þess þess vætt
þess þess þess vætt
þess þess þess vætt

4. Ek skylda þess vætt þess,
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5. Allir er vætt þess þess,
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6. Þessi átt til þess þess þess,
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7. Þjarki átt þess þess þess,
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22. Grandvarr skyldi eon göðri
móðir.

Gætur varð at þingi sáðr,
sjá vildi jöfrum seman
ekki er mér at stóra gamar;
kanna vildak sjá við smárum,
sáðlan hygg at gygvi veruna,
vel hefr hion, er síu of sík,
svartflokktí er kvæði mítt.

23. Jafnan segle eon rúði rós,
þekvir menn gefu græna hús,
vep at einu er unguð veður,
engt maðr er roskian þessr;
falle er vón at fornu tré,
flaura þykkir goti en stí,
auðsuna er-annar vaman,
eigi hámsk of ekapáðr.

24. Þingi knethr af annar mein,
sáðri hefr at naman aðri
heimt þesskí maðr at sáðri,
manis slíur hygg at mér káðri;
erfr veðr þines til kanna,
eign þarf at fjúðra manu,
þannig hefr mér þesskí i land,
þessvíturam sláðr sjáðr sáðri.

25. Sáðlan hiltíðr þesskí rós,
flauri,
þjóðin verða at þessum kóðri,
þesskí hefr þat þesskí fyr aðri,
þesskí kóðr á maðr þesskí þesskí;
þesskí er þesskí þesskí þesskí þesskí,
nú verðr sunn þesskí þesskí;
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26. Þesskí þesskí þesskí þesskí þesskí,
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27. Gullormr á sér brendhent
hól,

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28. Góðr má þesskí er gangið
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29. Óðr er þesskí þesskí þesskí þesskí,
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30. Þesskí þesskí þesskí þesskí þesskí,
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