

## Þórður hreða in Saga and *Rímur*

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*Þórðar saga hreðu*, a fourteenth-century Íslendinga saga, leads a somewhat shadowy life in saga literature. While praised by some, notably Eugen Mogk in the *Grundriss* (Mogk 1901-9, 852f.), it is passed over quickly in most handbooks and is ignored by the ambitious *Íslensk bókmenntasaga* of the 1990's. Although a pure feud saga, it is not mentioned in Theodore Andersson's and Jesse Byock's books on feud in the sagas. Such discussion as has occurred has been mostly about the relationship between AM 564a, 4to, formerly thought to be fragments of Vatnshyrna, and the body of the text as it is preserved by the fragmentary fifteenth century MS. AM 551 and its seventeenth century copy AM 139, on which Jóhannes Halldórsson's *Fornrit* edition of 1959 is based; there seems to be agreement now that the pseudo-Vatnshyrna bits are not testimonies of an older version but attempts to fit a basically fictional saga into a genealogical framework.

In this neglect, there may still be a prejudice in favour of sagas that have at least some ties with the settlement and early history of Iceland. *Þórðar saga* has the usual historical trappings: Þórðr and his brothers emigrate because they are banished from Norway after having slain one of the Gunnhild-sons that ruled various bits of Norway in the second half of the tenth century, and Miðfjarðar-Skeggi, the local chieftain on Húnaflói, whom Þórðr confronts after settling in Iceland, is well attested in other sources. But most of the other characters occurring in the saga are not, and the *lausavisur* attributed to Þórðr were in all likelihood composed by the author of the saga.

The template behind the protagonist may have been a skilful builder and shipwright of that name in the western part of the Icelandic north coast whose works and renown lived on in the region. House-building and carving are not the stuff of heroic narrative, although the *Króka-Refs saga* shows that such skills can well be put to dramatic use; so this local celebrity was given a story of challenges and conflicts in the style of the classical family sagas. With his exploits as a young man in Norway and a fair bit of money to spend, he does not feel he has to defer to Skeggi, who in turn resents the newcomer's arrogance. What keeps the conflict from exploding is the fact that Þórðr saves Skeggi's son Eiðr from drowning when his foolish foster-father ignores a warning not to venture on a river packed with ice-floes in a small boat. After that, the boy, Skeggi's only child it would seem, decides to stay with the man who had saved his life, and every time the conflict between his father and his new foster-father flares up, he steps in and stops the fighting, and when Þórðr for once has been too provocative, Eiðr sees to it that Þórðr moves out of the area for a while. The other conflict-suspending and plot-extending device is two brothers, nephews of Skeggi's, arriving from Norway and falling successively in love with Þórðr's sister Sigríðr; Ormr, who thinks he can make her his mistress, is duly killed by Þórðr after being warned, while Ásbjörn, after a dutiful attempt to exact revenge for his brother's death, gets her eventually. The irony of a narrative evolving around the protagonist's victo-

rious fights, alone or in company, sometimes against overwhelming odds, is that he only acts to defend himself, with two exceptions, the killing of King Sigurðr slefa to vindicate his family's honour, which makes him well-known and respected, and his fight against Ásbjörn and his companions after a warning dream.

Apart from these main characters, there is a host of minor ones, many of them relatives of Skeggi's, some, like Indriði and Sörli sterki, true gentlemen, others, such as Jón á Hvassafelli and Qzur á Grund, mean and treacherous. One of the more prominent one, drawn with touches of ridicule, is the rich and elderly Þórhallr at Miklabær, who shelters Þórðr while the latter keeps away from Miðfjörðr and who brags about protecting and supporting him but time and again proves a miserable coward who betrays his guest. It is Skeggi who finishes him off after such an incident because he has drawn the sword Sköfnungr, taken from King Hrólfkraki's grave, and that sword has to taste blood before it can be returned to its sheath, whereupon Þórðr, previously a loyal and respectful houseguest, is free to marry the young widow Ólǫf. Þórðr, too, has a wondrous weapon, a *sax* he got from King Gamli in Norway for faithful service as a part of his *hirð*.

It is true, as Finnur Jónsson (1904-5, 448) remarks, that there is rather a lot of fighting in the saga. That is true of a lot of the later sagas, and especially the *formaldar-* and *riddara sögur* that took over from the family sagas, and the *rimur* that replaced them as a productive genre. The more the Icelanders were removed in time from Viking exploits and the infighting that ended with the Norwegian kings asserting their rule over the island, the stronger, it would seem, became their taste for imagined fights, and the rich vocabulary for warrior, battle, weapons, armour they had inherited, above all from skaldic poetry, was crying out to be used.

My contention is that despite of this, *Þórðar saga hreðu* is an undeservedly under-valued saga, economically told, rich in its range of characters and their interaction, and rich in memorable scenes (the saving of the drowning trio, another winter scene where Þórðr and Eyvindr use their spears as brakes when sliding down a precipitous frozen slope, the fight arising at a *kaupstefna* over a precious dress that two ladies have charged their menfolk to get for them, Þórhallr's execution at his bedside, the varied instances of Eiðr's intelligence, loyalty and diplomacy).

Yet my purpose today is not to analyse the saga text but to describe its adaptation in two *rimur* cycles. It is incomprehensible to me that twelve saga conferences could pass without the survival of sagas in *rimur* form ever being discussed, when during half a millenium the saga texts were still copied and read for entertainment but *rimur* was the productive form of epic. It would seem that the damning of the genre by the Romantic Nationalists in the nineteenth century, notably Jónas Hallgrímsson's review of Sigurður Breiðfjörð's *Tistrams rimur* in *Fjölnir* 1837, was a blow that has inhibited *rimur* studies both in Iceland and abroad.

*Þórðar saga hreðu* must have been a popular saga, judging by the number of preserved manuscripts. We know of two *rimur* treatments in the seventeenth century, one by Þorvaldur Magnússon, preserved in Landbókasafn in MS. form, and one by Sigmundur Helgason, of which only one *mansöngur* but no narrative verse has survived. The two I am presenting here were both composed within a decade in the early nineteenth century: Sigurður Breiðfjörð's (hereafter SBr) in 1820, Hallgrímur Jónsson's (hereafter HgrJ), after a gestation period of more than ten years, in 1831, and

both were subsequently printed, Hallgrímur's in 1852, Sigurður's only in 1971, despite his fame as one of the outstanding nineteenth-century poets. As the name he adopted instead of a patronymic suggests, he was from the west coast of Iceland; he was sent to Copenhagen twice, in 1814 to be trained as a cooper and again in 1830 to study law, a failed project as he was too unstable, too homesick and too alcoholic to come to grips with his studies; subsequently he practised the cooper's trade in Greenland for three years. He got in trouble with the law because he remarried before his first marriage was formally dissolved; he called his son from that marriage Jens Baggesen, after the Danish poet whom he also translated. Hallgrímur was from the area where *Þórðar saga* takes place, and some passages in his *rimur* suggest that there may still have been an oral tradition about Þórður's fame as a builder. Despite his medical abilities which procured him the byname '*læknir*' and his genial personality, Hallgrímur spent his life in poverty, maybe no wonder since he had eight children in his first marriage.

Looking again at the number of surviving manuscripts, Hallgrímur's was the more widely known. The 1852 editor, Ásgeir Finnbogason, a bookbinder by trade, says in his postscript that the main reason why he had them printed was to satisfy a continuous demand, since the man who had made a living by selling handwritten copies had died. Hallgrímur mentions in the final *mansöngur* that he has heard of another poet treating the same subject. Nothing in the text suggests that he knew Sigurður's cycle; their sharing a number of kennings is no indication of intertextuality in view of the formulaic nature of such expressions. But they must have followed the same text tradition, not the one adopted in the *Íslkenzka Fornrit* edition but one deriving from ÁM 471, which deviates from the former in a few details.

Lack of originality in content was one of the reasons why the Romantic poets thought *rimur* an inferior genre, and like other *rimur* poets, our pair followed their prose source quite closely, Hallgrímur more so than Sigurður, who tends to shorten, especially dialogue parts and towards the end even some scenes; he seems to have been in a hurry to get the job, which he claims to do for a certain Guðrún, finished. His work consists of ten *rimur* comprising 718 stanzas, Hallgrímur's of seventeen *rimur* and 1550 stanzas, so it is more than twice as long as Sigurður's.

This shows the latitude the genre allowed; while Hallgrímur does not introduce new story elements, he indulges in descriptions; descriptions of battle mostly, but also descriptions of travelling on water (ii 11-16; something the seventeenth-century Hallgrímur Pétursson, the author of the *Passíusálmur*, was also fond of) or on land (e.g. Skeggi's stealthy expedition at night from Reykjar to Miklabær; xi 73-83). He devotes no less than six stanzas to describing Skeggi's wild horses (iv 79-85); they don't appear in the prose text, nor do they have any function in the narrative. There are just a few instances where Sigurður is more detailed: Þórður egging his brother Klippur, while still in Norway, to seek revenge for the rape of his wife, a classical *hvöt* (seven stanzas against Hallgrímur's three), or Þórður's warning to Ormur to leave his sister alone. Otherwise, Hallgrímur is invariably more detailed; to take Þórður's last recorded fight, the one with Sörli sterki (otherwise known from a *fornaldarsaga* called after him, but here roped in as a famous fighter): the saga devotes eighteen lines to their encounter and dialogue and six lines to the fight itself; Sigurður, who is particularly brief, gives five stanzas to the encounter and three to the fight; Hallgrímur describes the encounter over fifteen stanzas and the fighting over twenty-eight; I will

return to this episode to illustrate the *rímur* treatment of the saga text. The poets' respect for their source extends to the twelve *lausavísur* attributed to Þórður; each of the two poets referring to them using expressions like '*vísu kvað*' or '*svarar í ljóðum*', and Hallgrímur actually attempting to transcribe their content to the extent that it could be done in such a different medium.

*Rímur* poets are, on the whole, as 'invisible' in the narrative as the authors of saga texts; like them, they make brief appearances when they signal a change of scene or time but otherwise let incidents and dialogue speak for themselves. They have, after all, the *mansöngvar* at the beginning of each *ríma* for making personal statements, whether it is to give their view of the world, vent their opinions, discuss their personal problems with the other sex or with the task of producing *rímur*, or simply to show off their skills by parading their knowledge of mythology, of poetic vocabulary and kennings. So it comes as a surprise when the author sticks up his head in the middle of the narrative. In xiv 61 Hallgrímur criticizes the saga text because it does not say what happened to Þórður's brother Eyjólfur in a particular battle, though he had been mentioned as being in Þórður's party; but from his appearing later in the saga he concludes that Eyjólfur must have survived the fighting (1).<sup>1</sup> A more serious criticism, though possibly tongue in cheek as often with Sigurður, occurs in stanzas 43-46 of his fifth *ríma*, where Ormur, described as a strong and handsome young man, courts Sigríður. The saga implies that she rejected him but SBr thinks he knows women better; they're more inclined to say yes when they find themselves alone with a man (2). And one can see that even the saga text may have allowed for some ambiguity. When Ormur comes to Sigríður in bright daylight while she is washing linen because he thinks that Þórður is away, he lies down in her lap and puts her arms around his head, and while she says this is without her consent and reminds him of her brother's warning, Þórður, when he arrives, still finds them in this position. In the first *ríma*, when mentioning King Sigurður slefa sleeping with Klippur's wife, the poet says 'the lustfulness of that old man makes me laugh' (3). The only time Hallgrímur suggests an intimacy not warranted by the saga text is after Ólöf has agreed not to re-marry for three years after her unworthy husband's death:

'Tying ropes of love, they said good-bye to each other at parting; some think that the ring-ankle [kenning for woman] may have kissed the shield-conifer [kenning for man]' (4)

While the *mansöngvar* at the beginning of each *ríma* can cover up to twenty stanzas (ten is about the average) and have the function of letting the poet engage in some banter with his audience in the real-life situation he finds himself in and prepare them for what is coming, the corresponding passages at the end of each *ríma*, which mark the return from fiction to the reality of the present, are usually quite short, one or two stanzas, when the poet pleads tiredness or asks for a drink. In these final stanzas, a linking up with the story is not unusual. Sigurður ends his second *ríma* with Skeggi expressing his displeasure and foreboding about the boy Eiður staying with Þórður, and the poet continues in the second last stanza:

'the truth of all that will come to light later; for the moment, both Skeggi and I will fall silent',

followed in the last stanza by a conventional metaphorical ending:

<sup>1</sup> Icelandic passages translated or paraphrased will be available on a handout.

'The *pula* of words goes into the shed of silence; the "mask" [poetic word for "night"] is put over the path of the earth; the *ríma* falls, and I go to sleep' (5).

At the end of the third *ríma*, he refuses to follow Þórður on a dangerous expedition; he might risk his life. Similarly, Hallgrímur ends his second *ríma* with Þorkell's boat overturning, and the poet continues in the last stanza:

'In the same way, Suðri's boat [kenning for "the poem"] sank in Hveðras rippling water [kenning for "the sea"]; I was lucky to be washed back to the land of silence' (5).

'The dwarf's boat' is the most frequent metaphor for poetry, and the name of any dwarf can substitute for the common noun, just as the name of any island, here Hveðra, can serve in metaphors for sea. The same connection between a real boat in the story and the metaphorical boat of poetry is made at the end of Hallgrímur's first *ríma*, when Þórður and his brothers are ready to depart for Iceland:

'I don't have the heart to follow them, exhausted from my labour as I am; may the tether of silence look after Hleiðólf's poor leaking ferry' (6).

Keeping boats in good repair was an unending task in Iceland, and the many references to the boat of poetry needing to be fixed must have established a bond between the *ríma* performer and his audience. The eighth *ríma* ends with a yule-time drinking party, and the poet ends:

'Fortune favours not all people in this manner / I now lack Kjalar's wine [kenning for poetry], and with that my *ríma* stops'.

At the end of the thirteenth *ríma*, another fight is about to start, and the singer says:

'Let the smart armour trees (kenning for "fighters") meet; may [my] small day's work stop for the time being, may the melody-rich person [the singer] enjoy his earnings'. (9)

Links between the mead of poetry and the singer thirsting for more earthly drinks are also part of the *rimur* poet's humorous stock-in-trade.

To return to the longer *mansöngvar* at the beginning of each *ríma*, Sigurður, in his fifth *ríma*, moves playfully between the fictional and the actual scene. He is getting his modest poetry boat ready; but will it be able to carry Þórður? And there is a crowd of other persons that wish to be taken aboard (new characters are introduced by the saga at this point). He will take them all on but once they are out at sea, he'll throw them out and just keep Þórður - which is a way of announcing that they will not be found at the end of the journey (the story) whereas Þórður will. He ends with a rousing 'All aboard!', which is also an admonition to his listeners to pay attention. Another example of the linking of narrative is the *mansöngur* of Hallgrímur's seventh *ríma*. Þórður is facing another of his fights, this time against Ormur's companion Indriði, and the poet draws the 'word-sword' from its sheath to help Þórður, taking sides unashamedly, and this bellicose parallel is upheld through to the ninth and last stanza of the *mansöngur*, which introduces the narrative:

'Give me space to wield my weapon, farmers, and you who sit nearby, be quiet; the *stef* of the *mansöngur* is ended, the story is going to soil the paper' (7).

On the other hand, the *rimur* singer often shows his attitude by using derogatory terms in referring to disagreeable characters; Hallgrímur, in the sixth *ríma*, uses the

terms *auli*, *naudasvin* and *vomur* for Ormur, whereas Sigurður, himself something of a ladies' man, expresses pity for Ormur's fate in the *mansöngur* of his fifth *ríma*. In the *mansöngur* of the thirteenth *ríma*, when Hallgrímur deplures how people often are misjudged and the poet is not appreciated or verbally attacked, he takes comfort in the thought of Þórður also meeting undeserved hostility but finding a true friend, Eiður, to help him out of trouble.

At the end of the cycle, with the poet looking back on his work, the final *mansöngur* is expanded. Sigurður uses ten stanzas, thanking Óðinn for his assistance and expressing hopes that he will be duly rewarded by the woman for whom he has composed the cycle. Hallgrímur, who at the beginning of his seventeenth and last *ríma* has given an account of the genesis of his work, expresses in the last eight stanzas the hope that the audience will be inspired by Þórður's example to follow the path of glory and find a friend in the hour of need, and he states the year of completion as 1833.

These glimpses of the *rimur* poets moving between the fictional plane provided by the saga and their own situation as performers making comments will not provide much insight about how they transform the original text. This I wish to demonstrate on a very small text sample for which I also have a recording done by ethnographic field workers in 1965. It describes Þórður's last recorded fight with Ormur's uncle Sörli sterki, recently arrived in Iceland and hence not part of the settlement with Ormur's local relatives. The saga text, from the end of ch. 13, is pretty straightforward:

'Then they move close to each other and fight most boldly. Þórður realised quickly that Sörli was an outstanding man when it came to using weapons, and he thought he had never before met a more valiant fighter. They inflicted many and deep wounds on each other, and the outcome was that Sörli fell dead to the ground; yet Þórður was so exhausted that he could not get on horseback on his own, rather his companions had to prop him up, he needing all the help he could get, and they rode downwards into the Öxna Valley to a farm called Crossriver. A farmer by the name of Einarr lived there. He received Þórður well; Þórður was bedridden with his injuries for a long time but recovered in the end.' (10)

Sigurður, hurrying towards the end of his tenth and last *ríma*, uses just four stanzas for this passage:

'(37) They strike in a spirit of heroism; they cut shields to pieces; each began to inflict life-threatening injuries on the other so that blood gushed out. (38) For a long time they test [each other's] shields and cut Rögnir's skin garments (breastplate, armour); Þórður sees that Sörli's arm knows how to fight. (39) Yet in the end, Sörli falls before the powerful man, and Þórður was not far from dying there as well. (40) But he was helped onto the horse and brought to Crossriver where he received very tender care, weak and injured as he was.' (11)

Hallgrímur, in his sixteenth *ríma*, elaborates this incident over twenty-five stanzas. It is Þórður's last reported fight, so he wishes to give his audience the full benefit of his descriptive resources. In translation it necessarily sounds trite and repetitive; in the original, the variety of poetic words and kennings used to fulfil the metrical requirements produces continuous change.

(58) The trees of saddle-blooms [unclear kenning for 'men'] took up their Ómi's sun [shield] quickly and stood firmly on the killing-spot; they achieve great honour. (59) Þórður sees that Sörli proceeds straight to the din of attack and that he would clearly surpass all human beings here. (59) The man's valour marked the way to Hei along the paths of sword-flood [blood] when the blows are arched over his armour so it trembles. (61) Sörli's mind turns violent in the pressing sword-disquiet [battle]; Þórður, in return, showed the same force with his sword. (62) In the steel-ploughing [battle], the brave champion, the one who makes Herjan's fish [sword] wild, received a wound from every blow, the very strong armour-spoiler [fighter]. (63) The splendid clothes of Þundur [armour] go to pieces under Kjalar's glittering [sword]; innumerable wound-rivers gushed down the sword-trees [fighters]. (64) The strength-filled mighty strikers put weight on the battle work; never before had the smart ones found someone who fully was their equal. (65) The said champions endowed with valour aroused the hilt-knob quarrel [battle]; the armour cut off both of them ended up covering the ground. (66) The apple trees of Héðin's wife [men] find the blows exceedingly wounding; the dew of the holster-snake [sword; +dew; blood] coloured Fjörgyn's cheeks [the earth]. (67) The swords sang the liturgy in Týr's dusky storm; gusts of smoke sprang from the lower voice-arch [chest]. (68) Each forceful hand desired to tie up the other with the bonds of death; a flight of sparks issued from the swords, the beach sucked in blood. (69) They found that in the heat of battle [?] Þundur's wife [the earth] trembled; blood and sweat streamed from the offerers of hand-stones [men]. (70) It did not seem clear to the trees of the wound-witch [fighters] who would first sink to Funding's bride [the earth]. (71) Nobody saw that they lost capacity to harden the spear-stubbornness [battle]; each, in a spirit of violent antagonism, wants to be seen to be the other's bane. (72) They hew and thrust hard at the trembling of the blade [battle] wherever either stood; the work of Gautr's storm [battle] was vehement, the wounds of both were smarting. (73) Sörli was superhumanly splendid, he fought not further away from courage while he bore more and larger wounds and defended himself when he was almost bloodless. (74) He was like a lion on the ground, he wielded the red steel until he fell dead on the earth, deprived of riches and speech. (75) He carried away that renown from the circle of champions (the poems mention it) that his last blow was not one bit weaker than the previous ones. (76) After that meeting of spears [battle], I can tell you simply, they buried the sword-tree [fighter] near Lurkasteinn. (77) Þórður's fame and praise are undying; he rests the raging weapon, the Freyr of the brightness of wells [man] carried victory from single combat. (78) His extremely large injuries hurt so much that he groaned with exhaustion; wound-flood [blood] gushed down from the Þórr of sea-fires [man]. (79) After the storm of sheath-snakes [battle] the man, half-grown in strength, with assistance got on to his saddle-seal [horse], although the wound-splash [blood] was running. (80) He wrote down the Yxna Valley, left to the hurt

of his injuries; the bridle-falcon [horse] stepped briskly, the wind cools the chest. (81) The doughty champion got himself to Crossriver from the hard entertainment of quarrel [fighting]; there, dear to everybody, he received healing.' (12)

The battle part proper is not so much a description of how the fight proceeded but linguistic variations of the general statement 'they fought valiantly and relentlessly and inflicted serious injuries on each other'. But there are some glimpses that remain visually memorable: Sörli fighting to the end like a lion, the wind cooling Þórður's chest as he is transported to the next farm.

*Rímur* are not primarily reading texts but texts to be performed, chanting, before an audience: hence the desire to establish audience contact at the beginning and end of each *ríma*. As with skaldic poetry, we can, as outsiders, wonder how much of the elaborate detail the listeners got at first hearing; but Icelandic listeners honed that skill over centuries. While the *rímur* author no doubt was on top of his text, although he may have varied it a little depending on time and occasion, it was probably not so easy for later generations of *rímur* singers to preserve the text intact. In the 1930's, the association *Iðunn* recorded (among many other samples) Ingibjörg Friðriksdóttir chanting five stanzas (40-43, 53, 55) from Hallgrímur's sixteenth *ríma*; these recordings were re-issued in 2004, together with the transcribed texts (*Silfurplötur*). In 1965, Hallfreður Öm Eiríksson, later Professor of Folklore at Háskóli Íslands, and the Danish music ethnologist Svend Nielsen recorded Þórður Guðbjartsson, a former sailor then aged seventy-four, in Patreksfjörður in NW Iceland, chanting some of Hallgrímur's *ríma*. Svend Nielsen was later to write a whole monograph on individual variation in oral delivery based on this recording; I suspect that quite a few of these variations were due to an old man's shaky voice and exhaustion. On a CD anthology recently issued, he sings twenty stanzas from the sixteenth *ríma*. The first thirteen describe Sörli and Þórður's unexpected meeting and their dialogue, which end with Sörli insisting on a fight but forbidding his men to meddle. Compared to the printed text, he skips four stanzas and takes the others not exactly in the same order. But when the battle begins, he is much more selective: he chants seven of the twenty-five stanzas, viz. 67, 73-74 and 77-80, and some have a slightly different wording, mostly in kennings that probably were not quite clear to him. We do not know whether this was all he remembered or whether it was what he had found suitable for performance. Like all texts used in oral performance, *rímur* have a certain fluidity, and in that respect they may be a truer reflection of practice at the time when sagas were a living genre rather than something frozen into an authoritative written shape and canonised, much as we may admire the writers who gave them that finality.

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