A Vision of the Skald

Seeking the Ideal in the
Probable Works of Snorri Sturluson

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Master of Philosophy Thesis
Viking and Medieval Norse Studies

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Summary

It is well known that *Snorra Edda* seeks to preserve and promote skaldic verse, heavily focusing on what is required to compose and understand such verse. Kevin Wanner, in his book *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda*, has argued that Snorri wrote *Edda* with an eye to preserving the relevancy of such verse to Norwegian court life and its ability to gain rewards from kings and chieftains, and thus also promoting a demand for the skilled craftsmen who produced it: skalds. Promoting such a figure necessarily requires that Snorri had some ideal in mind to communicate. Furthermore, it may be reasonably expected that such a project would not be limited to *Edda*, but would also be manifested in his other works.

Therefore, this study seeks to reveal the vision of the skald that may be underlying the three works which are most often attributed to Snorri Sturluson with varying degrees of confidence: *Edda*, *Heimskringla*, and *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*. As these works are diverse in style, content, and audience, I seek as comprehensive a picture as possible. This includes the skald’s role, how he views his craft, and much more — nearly everything revealed about the skald in these works except the rules of versification. Looking at whether and how the works may promote a demand for skalds and a desire to be a skald is a major tool in my analysis. A close reading of the skald-related mythology in *Edda* also figures prominently. I find that a vision of the skald may indeed be derived from these works. It is a multi-faceted vision that orients the skald with respect to the gods, the past, myth, poetry itself, training, duties, relations to others, and more. It is one that indeed promotes a demand for skalds and a desire to be a skald, and it makes an affirmative contribution to the case for Snorri’s authorship.
Acknowledgements

This master’s thesis is a product of my long-standing interest in skalds and poetry. Its immediate roots are found in my conference presentation about the Poetic Mead that predates the start of my master’s studies. From it, I came to expand my scope to a larger question, the one that motivates this thesis: “What do Snorri’s probable works say about skalds and their craft, other than how to compose the poetry?” It remained on my mind throughout my master’s studies, and two semester papers during my coursework also touched on the topic. I explored the question further in another conference presentation. Material from these presentations and papers has been worked into this thesis in various places without comment.

First and foremost, for this thesis itself, my thanks go to my supervisor, Karl G. Johansson, for his prompt readings of all of my drafts, his insightful comments, his invaluable guidance on the secondary literature for this topic, and his excellent scholarly demeanor. Thanks also go to Minjie Su and Beth Rogers for their proofreading. Any remaining errors are surely my own. Many thanks go to Michael Benskin — an inspiring example of an increasingly rare sort of traditional scholar — whose review of my drafts for his Older English Philology and Literature course made me a better writer and prepared me for the thesis writing process.

Beyond my thesis, I am grateful to all my professors during my coursework in the Viking and Medieval Norse Studies master’s program, from whom I learned much.

The Viking and Medieval Norse Studies master’s program itself gets my thanks for being such a wonderful experience. It is an expansion of the Medieval Icelandic Studies master’s program at Háskóli Íslands, and were I given a free hand to design my own two-year master’s program, I could scarcely have made one more to my liking. It provided me the opportunity to spend a year each at Háskóli Íslands and Universitetet i Oslo in pursuit of a joint master’s degree from both universities and take a unique combination of courses while living in the wonderful cities of Reykjavík and Oslo, respectively. My studies under the aegis of Athena

and Apollo, whose images adorn the logos of these two universities, have been a most singular and beneficial adventure for me. I am grateful for the mysterious workings of Wyrd that brought me into this program at exactly this time, Autumn 2014 through Spring 2016, as the program has turned out superbly for me. Any change in the timing, earlier or later, would have altered many things that Needed to happen the way they did, both academically and personally.

I have many others to thank as well, perhaps more than I can name here. Most especially, I thank my parents, Thomas and Janet Westcoat, for their constant support and encouragement all throughout my time in this program. For his steadfast friendship, I thank my twin brother, Jeffrey Westcoat. For their contributions to my personal growth which made this program possible for me, I thank the Hearth of Yggdrasil, the Rune-Gild, and my friends in them. I am especially grateful to Lucie Korecká for her encouragement, her belief in me, and much more.

Finally, for their exemplary natures and gifts of spirit, my thanks go to Óðinn for the Poetic Mead and to Bragi for skaldic craftsmanship. This thesis is dedicated to them and the skalds.
Foreword

Enjoy this journey through jumbled threads as I track the traces of times long gone. In Wyrd’s Well I cast my well-made net for a fleeting fish that’s filled with knowledge. Thus mead I make for many to sip of the honey harvested from those hallowed tales. I add to my brew the ink of scholars from a bounty of sources, books and articles.

The Skald I seek, that skillful man: a praiser of kings and a power-wielder, brave in battle and bold with words, who got a gift from Gautr’s deep crop. Well may it age and honor the wisdom of all who are mentioned within these pages. To Óðinn and Bragi I offer this work, hallowed in memory of helpful Kvasir.

Though his form is scattered in famous ‘scripts — Edda, Egils saga, and all Heimskringla — to light and life I shall link the pieces, so that all may know this noble artist.
Chapter 1: Introduction

I am quick to sing a noble man’s praises but stumble for words about misers; freely I speak of a king’s deeds, but stay silent about the people’s lies.

— Egill Skalla-Grimsson in *Egils saga*

1.1 Purpose, Scope, and Rationale

This work seeks to elucidate a vision of the skald as expressed in Old Norse literature. Some of the scope of that vision may be illustrated by the following questions. How did the skald learn his craft? How did he view his craft and its origins? What was its purpose? How did he relate to his fellow practitioners, the society he lived in, and the king or chieftain who patronized him? In some ways, elucidating this vision may be seen as complimentary to questions, explicit and implied, raised by Clunies Ross in the introduction to her book, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics*, especially regarding “the complex of ideas that underpinned traditional Norse views of poetry and poets.” She takes one approach to that complex of ideas, and I take another. As mine is a literary and not a historical study, I am seeking an idealized portrait, one according to partisans, not opponents, much like how the continental chivalric romances clearly had idealized portrayals of knights.

The skald as an esteemed professional serving kings or chieftains existed across hundreds of years, from the 9th to the early 14th centuries. To examine that figure across that timespan throughout the entirety of Old Norse literature would be a tremendous undertaking. So for this study, I must narrow my scope considerably, and I do so here by primarily considering just three works: *Snorra Edda*, *Heimskringla*, and *Egils saga*. Along the way, I will show that the three works take a great interest in promoting a demand for skalds and skaldcraft, demonstrating that it is indeed appropriate to seek an idealized image of the skald in them. There are three motives for this selection. The first is that all three works were

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2 Margaret Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), 1, for the quote, and 1–4, where she introduces the importance of poetry and poets in that society.
3 See, for example, Guðrún Nordal, *Tools of Literacy: The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 130.
originally contemporaneous, so that they may represent a roughly synchronic picture of the skald that was current in the Icelandic literature of the second quarter of the 13th century. The second is that the three works are very different in their intended audience and focus, and yet the skald is critical to all of them, so that they provide extremely diverse material in a small selection. The third and most exciting is that they may all have been originally written by, or under the close direction, of a single man: Snorri Sturluson, the most notable skaldic advocate of the time. Each point will now be elaborated on.

1.2 Contemporaneousness of the Original Compositions

The three texts have their origin in the Icelandic milieu of the first half of the 13th century. Of course, their surviving manuscripts are younger, and this issue is dealt with in a later section. The composition of *Snorra Edda* is now usually thought to have been started with *Háttatal* upon Snorri’s return from his first trip to Norway in 1220.\(^4\) He may still have been revising parts of it when died in 1241.\(^5\) However, the order of its composition does not concern me here, since I look at it for the overall impression that it gives as a whole. *Heimskringla* is generally dated to the range 1220–1230: between Snorri’s return from his first trip to Norway in 1220 and his nephew Sturla’s interest in 1230 in copying *sögubækr* (‘history or story books’) of his.\(^6\) The text of *Egils saga*, in some form or another, can be no later than the middle of the 13th century, the dating assigned to the 0-fragment which contains a piece of it.\(^7\) It does not seem clear exactly how much earlier the saga is thought to be, but that is not a problem here. Of course, the fact that Snorri’s authorship can be entertained so frequently is a tacit recognition that no serious obstacles exist for a date within Snorri’s lifetime. It could easily be the case that all three works were originally composed in the range of 1220–1241.

\(^4\) Elias Wessén, introduction to *Codex Regius of the Younger Edda: MS No. 2367 4° in the Old Royal Library of Copenhagen*, ed. Einar Munksgaard, Corpus Codicum Islandicorum Mediae Ævi 14 (Copenhagen: Einar Munksgaard, 1940), 31–32.


\(^7\) See, for example, Bjarni Einarsson, foreword to *Egils saga*, ed. Bjarni Einarsson (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2003), ix.
1.3 The Audiences, Focuses, and Diversity of the Works Considered

Although their audiences overlap somewhat, these works differ sufficiently so that a very broad spectrum of Icelanders and Norwegians is covered. Moreover, the material presented in them differs even more, ranging over mythology and verse composition, historical writing, and biography. Yet the skald is ever-present in all of them.

*Snorra Edda*, of course, is aimed at the prospective skalds themselves, a subset of Icelanders at large. As a manual on composing poetry, it is clearly the most skald-centered work of the group. As a text by a skald for skalds and one that is loaded with mythology, it is the most likely of the three to say something about how the skalds should view themselves, their craft, and their mission.

*Heimskringla*, at first glance, would seem to be aimed at the Norwegian court, for it is nothing less than the history of Norway’s kings and their courts back to their mythical ancestors. For Snorri, who was hoping to gain favor with the royal court, it is impossible to imagine that he would not send or present it to them. Yet the language (using *hingat* as ‘to Iceland,’ for instance, instead of as ‘to Norway’) and some of the episodes (Hrœrekr konungr’s burial in Iceland) would seem to indicate that Snorri had an Icelandic audience in mind also. The euhemerizing material in *Ynglinga saga*, however, could easily be aimed at both, as a reinforcement to similar material in *Snorra Edda* aimed at Icelanders and as part of an attempt to persuade Norwegian kings to appreciate poems that reference heathen gods. Of course, the Norwegian past is also the Icelandic past prior to the settlement, and they maintain a significant overlap afterwards. The work’s grounding in skaldic testimony for the events described is ever-present, and quotations of skaldic verse are frequent, with more than six hundred of them spread across some sixty skalds. In such a vast work, one reasonably expects to find ample material in the prose about the skald’s role in serving those kings whose history is described.

*Egils saga*, on the other hand, appears primarily aimed toward Icelanders. Its focus on the settlement and early years of Icelandic society would have made it appealing to the descendants of Egill’s family in the region, who were quite numerous by the 13th century. There are few, if any, considerations in it for a Norwegian audience. The trouble that Egill’s

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9 Ibid., 76.
family makes for the kings of Norway, mainly Haraldr hárfagri and Eiríkr blóðøx, would not appeal to the Norwegian court. Most particularly, the degree to which Egill challenges the latter king could only encourage the court to regard skalds and Icelanders with suspicion. In this text, there is likely to be the kind of material that Icelanders would primarily tell themselves about skalds, whereas Heimskringla with its dual audience would likely have a view of the skald that does not provoke the Norwegian court. Finally, the saga provides a detailed portrait of one of the greatest skalds of the Viking Age, and for a study like this, such a view is essential for a complete picture.

Thus, in audience and focus, there is perhaps as wide a base as could be hoped for in just three works, and despite the differences, all three texts clearly treat the skald as an important and central figure. As will be seen, that figure is one which is respected, esteemed, and powerful, making these works suitable for elucidating an idealized portrait of the skald. Of course, this view may reflect more of what the author or authors wanted the role of the skald to be and/or believed it to have been in the past, rather than the actual role of the skald in the second quarter of the 13th century.

1.4 On Snorri’s Authorship of the Three Works
The strength of the above two points is adequate to justify the choice of texts considered here. This final point, however, is the most exciting one, for it suggests the possibility that the vision of the skald derived from the three works may form a coherent whole, instead of being a composite of different authors who may have had different purposes. I briefly discuss here the current state of the attribution of these works to Snorri and what is meant by authorship in such a context. The effect of manuscript issues on this is discussed in the next section.

For Snorra Edda, Snorri’s authorship is indicated by the rubric of the Codex Upsaliensis manuscript, quotes of Háttatal verses attributed to him in other works, a manuscript fragment attributing Skálkskaparmál to him, and in Codex Wormianus where Háttatal commentary is attributed to him in the preface to the Grammatical Treatises — and his authorship has been generally accepted for hundreds of years. For Heimskringla, there are no surviving manuscripts directly naming Snorri, but there is still general agreement that

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10 Faulkes, introduction to Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning, xiii–xiv. His complete authorship discussion runs on pages xii–xvi.
Snorri was the author.\textsuperscript{11} The indirect evidence includes Sturla’s \textit{sögubækr} statement, 13th- and 14th-century references to Snorri as an authority on Norwegian kings, and two 16th-century translators who named him as the author.\textsuperscript{12} Finlay notes that “he seems better equipped for it than any of his contemporaries by education, background, and political experience.”\textsuperscript{13} The agreement is not total, however. Others of the 16th or early 17th century, in citing or translating \textit{Heimskringla}, either named no author or a different author.\textsuperscript{14}

For \textit{Egils saga}, there are also no direct indications that Snorri was the author, but there is nonetheless a distinct possibility for it, and several scholars have made that case. Sigurður Nordal was quite convinced of it and presented a detailed argument.\textsuperscript{15} Other studies have contributed to the case, notably Hallberg’s analysis of the vocabulary used in it versus \textit{Heimskringla} and several other sagas, finding the strongest connection between \textit{Heimskringla} and \textit{Egils saga}.\textsuperscript{16} On the other hand, Cormack questions the attribution of the two to a single author as well as identifying that author with Snorri.\textsuperscript{17} More recently, Torfi Tulinius notes that: “The evidence for his authorship of \textit{Egils saga} is far from being conclusive. Nevertheless, if he did not compose it, the author or authors were certainly quite close to him in both time and space.”\textsuperscript{18} Yet, as will be seen, even if Snorri did not write, commission, authorize, or in any other way oversee the production of \textit{Egils saga}, it is still quite compatible with his aims to revive the skaldic arts.

The nature of medieval authorship, as a whole, is quite different from modern authorship. The first point to be noted, which is not much of a concern, is that it was often a more collaborative and cooperative process than for today’s authors. For instance, Snorri is likely to have used pre-existing narratives in \textit{Heimskringla}, but these may have been rewritten somewhat.\textsuperscript{19} A telling comment in \textit{Heimskringla} is: “Þat vil ek nú næst rita láta at segja frá

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{11} Whaley, \textit{Heimskringla: An Introduction}, 13, 15.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 14–15.
\textsuperscript{13} Finlay, introduction to \textit{Heimskringla}, 1:viii.
\textsuperscript{14} Whaley, \textit{Heimskringla: An Introduction}, 14.
\textsuperscript{17} Margaret Cormack, “\textit{Heimskringla, Egils saga, and the Daughter of Eiríkr blóðøx},” \textit{Alvíssmál} 10 (2001): 66–68.
\textsuperscript{19} Whaley, \textit{Heimskringla: An Introduction}, 15–16.
\end{flushleft}
islenzkum mónum” (”Now I want to have narratives written about Icelanders next”).\textsuperscript{20} This suggests he had scribes working for him.\textsuperscript{21} There is no reason or necessity here to suppose it is any different with \textit{Snorra Edda} or \textit{Egils saga}, regardless of the author. The second point, that the medieval author “is unlikely to hold originality or personal expression as priorities,”\textsuperscript{22} is not problematic either, since “if he has a conscious view of his rôle at all, it will be as a part of a communal endeavour to preserve and improve on traditional materials.”\textsuperscript{23} From both points, the ‘author’ may often be better described as a compiler, but this is acceptable. Even as a compiler, such an author chooses and edits the texts that are put together. Since the author of each work clearly had a great interest in skalds, such work to “preserve and improve on traditional materials” in the writing process would include a bias toward the material that is quite in line with what I am trying to uncover. That it may have been Snorri for all three works is a bonus. So, in accord with the general consensus, I will refer to the author of \textit{Snorra Edda} and \textit{Heimskringla} as ‘Snorri’ throughout this work. However, in accord with the lack of consensus, I will refer to the author of \textit{Egils saga} as ‘the author.’ For collectively referring to all three works, I will use ‘the authors’ for the sake of simplicity to avoid the awkwardness of a construction like ‘the author(s).’

1.5 Manuscripts and Choice of Texts

Having established the above, it is time to discuss the texts to be used here and their manuscript issues. The latter in particular can be more problematic for my aims here than the issues regarding the dating and authorship mentioned above.

In his analysis of \textit{Snorra Edda} as designed to preserve the ability of skaldic verse to gain rewards from noble and royal consumers, Wanner seeks to get as close as possible to Snorri’s original text, and settles on the Codex Regius (R) text for that purpose, noting there is general agreement on this, but recognizing there can be no absolute certainty, as that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} Snorri Sturluson, \textit{Heimskringla}, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, 3 vols., 4th, 3rd, and 2nd eds. respectively, Íslenzk fornrit 26–28 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélags, 2002, 2002, and 1979), 1:328; Snorri Sturluson, \textit{Heimskringla}, trans. Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes, 3 vols. (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2011–2015), 1:205. For the three main works under consideration, and only these three, nearly all of my citations of them will be dual citations like this one, to both a scholarly edition of the Old Norse text and a modern English translation.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Snorri, \textit{Heimskringla}, trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 1:205n.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Whaley, \textit{Heimskringla: An Introduction}, 18.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
manuscript is still at some remove from the original. As my purpose is also best served by getting as close as possible to Snorri’s original text as it was in the second quarter of the 13th century, I must prefer R as well, and I use the three-part edition by Anthony Faulkes which is based on it. The R manuscript itself, however, is dated to the first half of the 14th century.

The textuality of Heimskringla is more complicated. The Kringla manuscript (K), the oldest one known (which now, except for one leaf, survives only in 17th-century paper transcripts), is considered to be the closest to Snorri’s archetype, but it is still at some remove from it. It is dated to circa 1260 on internal evidence by Gustav Storm and on the hand of the scribe by Finnur Jónsson. The surviving witnesses to K do not contain the prologue (an important piece for this study), but the possibility that it had it originally cannot be ruled out. Thus, the text of the prologue comes from Codex Frisianus and transcripts of the Jòfraskinna manuscript. Furthermore, recent research shows that, based on the surviving witnesses, a unified stemma going back to a single archetype for what is today known as Heimskringla is not possible, and that each of its three parts should instead have its own stemma. The two prevailing standard editions are those of Finnur Jónsson and Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, both of which are based on K, although they differ in exactly how they use other manuscripts for assistance. However, the other manuscripts that are relied on are mostly from the early 14th century at the latest, and they do not vary greatly. There does not seem to be any compelling reason to prefer one edition over the other on its own merits for this study. I have chosen the edition of Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, which has the advantage of having a recent, scholarly English translation available.

25 Faulkes, introduction to Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning, xxviii.  
26 Whaley, Heimskringla: An Introduction, 42–43, with the full discussion of the issues covering 41–47.  
28 Jørgensen, Lost Vellum Kringla, 50–56.  
29 Ibid., vii, 315.  
31 Ibid., 43, 45.  
32 This translation is Snorri, Heimskringla, trans. Finlay and Faulkes.
Here, I only use *Heimskringla* proper and I leave aside the *Separate Saga of St. Óláfr*, as the latter was adapted and incorporated into the former, thus making the *Heimskringla* version of it a more final one. However, Louis-Jensen has doubts about whether *Heimskringla* was ever put together as a whole by Snorri. She suggests that the *Separate Saga of St. Óláfr* may have only been merged into the rest of *Heimskringla* by a later redactor, perhaps *ad hoc* for K itself. Yet that concern proves moot here. As it turned out, there was little, if anything, to be gained by considering those parts of the *Separate Saga* that were not already in *Heimskringla* proper (and Bjarni’s edition made this easy to determine). Similarly, I consider only the prologue to *Heimskringla* proper. The prologue (in both its versions) to the *Separate Saga* is generally thought to be a later redaction of the *Heimskringla* prologue. Also, like the rest of the *Separate Saga*, consideration of its prologue would not add anything here. Yet from all this, it should be kept in mind that *Heimskringla* has unity issues that cannot be absolutely resolved.

For *Egils saga*, it is known that the manuscripts vary in how much of the three major poems — *Arinbjarnarkviða*, *Sonatorrek*, and *Hofuðlausn* — they contain. This is not a major concern here. If one considers the poems to have been composed by Egill himself, it may be that they were well known enough at the time of writing that it was thought sufficient to merely mention them or quote a single stanza or two, and the quoting of such single stanzas starting a poem is common enough in *Heimskringla*. Beyond that, my analysis is focused mostly on the prose and how the poetry is cited within it, not usually on the poems themselves. If they were the work of the saga author, then they are more likely to show the influence of 13th-century attitudes than otherwise, but in either case they are part of the views expressed by the work. I use the edition of Bjarni Einarsson here, based mainly on the text of the 14th-century Möðruvallabók (M), although M “is clearly the result of a determined effort to abbreviate the text (the omission of the three long poems shows the same intention),” as the other major redactions in Codex Wolfenbüttel and Ketilsbók are inferior to it, although they

33 See, for example, Finlay, introduction to *Heimskringla*, 2:x.
36 Bjarni Einarsson, foreword to *Egils saga*, ix.
are useful, as they have the long poems that M lacks. So from that, it may be possible to suppose the long poems were originally in the archetype.

Ultimately, it must be admitted that the vision of the skald that emerges from these works as they have survived is probably not a pure 1230’s view of things, but may have some mixture of later views into the 14th century. Therefore, material from each work which is relevant to this study and which may be affected by interpolation issues will be noted as it is dealt with. However, the way these three editors have approached the texts will already have minimized such interpolations. Unnoticed interpolations may well remain, but if they are minor enough that they have escaped notice, it is because they are a good fit to the original structure, and therefore would probably not alter my overall analysis much. That the range of time represented here may potentially go to a little over one hundred years does not seem so bad.

1.6 Treatment of the Texts

This is primarily a literary analysis, one that is concerned with what is in the texts themselves. Whether every bit of evidence looked at here was deliberately placed by the author is beside the point. Due to the differing nature of the three works, I will treat each in its own chapter. In many ways, the approach used on each of them is similar, but there are key differences. Here I will summarize some aspects of how I treat the works.

The function of verse quotations as a whole will be considered for each work, and individually when they have something to contribute. Little would be gained by analyzing every single verse in detail. A distinction has sometimes been made between the ways in which a verse is used, namely whether it is cited as a source to validate the prose, or whether it is part of the dialogue, as if spoken extemporaneously in response to a person or situation — these are known as authenticating and situational verses, respectively. However, they are not always easy to distinguish, and one may wonder if an apparent situational verse, especially if it is a direct address, was instead the inspiration to craft a scene based on it, much as an ordinary authenticating verse might be. Generally, I will make the distinction where there is something to gain by doing so.

37 Bjarni Einarsson, foreword to *Egils saga*, ix–x. M has *Arinbjarnarkviða* at the end of the text, not at the appropriate spot in the middle of the saga.

Though *Snorra Edda* is primarily a guide to composing verse, with all the intricacies of meter, language, and the mythological material needed for kennings, it is reasonable to suppose that the material will also say something about the skald himself. Though euhemerized, the mythology is nevertheless something that the skald is participating in by composing verses based on it, and some of the implications of this participation will be considered. A special analysis is made of the symbolism of the Mead Myth, for if anything in *Snorra Edda* is trying to communicate symbolically with the would-be skald about the nature of his craft, it is surely this. Frank’s argument suggests that Snorri was largely the creator of the Mead Myth as it is found in *Skáldskaparmál*, and that he deliberately sought mythological interpretations from his source material for it. If accepted, it shows how important he thought the Mead Myth was, and that it may contain, consciously or not, Snorri’s own ideas of what poetry was.

*Heimskringla* was searched for references to the roles of poets and poetry, amidst the historical narrative. The most important aspects that emerged were the contributions of *Ynglinga saga* to the mythology of skalds and poetry and how the skald is depicted serving and interacting with kings or chieftains. Of the skalds, Sigvatr Þórðarson has the largest role of any in the most central saga of the text, *Óláfs saga ins helga*. Here, it may also be noted that, where possible, I have organized the treatment of the material in each chapter by the major individual skalds and gods featured in the texts. This allows for a narrative focus on the role that each has.

*Egils saga* features the life of a skald in expansive detail. There is much more to Egill’s life than being a skald, however, and my focus here is primarily on Egill qua skald. So in looking at the saga’s material, I attempt to filter out the ordinary aspects of his life that would be common to other well-to-do Icelanders, such as lawsuits, farming, and viking raids, and instead focus on the elements that have bearing on poetry or skalds, such as his use of verse and interactions with kings. However, certain aspects of the overall treatment of Egill’s life by the author are also considered.

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1.7 On my Approach to Mythology

Before proceeding, some remarks on how I approach the mythology in the texts are in order. Modern poets, such as Heaney and Auden, have consciously sought inspiration from myth and described their craft in mythic terms. Heaney, in his poem “The Given Note,” talks of a tune that a fiddler has obtained from the air blowing in off the ocean — a very mythic way of thinking. Auden produced his own translation of the Poetic Edda, an indication of the value that he placed on myth. He also, in his “Ode to Terminus,” credits that Roman god “for giving us games and grammar and metres,” although this view of Terminus seems unique to him. It is clear that Old Norse poets also described their craft in mythic terms. On myth generally, Niles observes that:

Through their engagement with myths and myth-like narratives, it is widely believed, human beings are able to tap into the deeper resources of their lives as sentient individuals. One need not think of this spiritually-enriching process in mystical terms. Rather, one can regard it as what naturally follows when, by internalizing a myth and reconceiving it in personal terms, an individual takes part in collective acts of mythopoesis that have involved many minds over long periods of time.

Furthermore, Harris, in applying Eliade’s ideas to an analysis of Egill Skalla-Grimsson’s Sonatorrek, quotes Eliade: “Objects and acts acquire a value, and in so doing become real, because they participate, after one fashion or another, in a reality that transcends them.”

Therefore, this study looks at what kind of collective mythopoesis and transcendent reality may be communicated by the three works under consideration, and how it may have influenced practicing skalds in a way that goes beyond knowledge of meter, heiti, kennings, mythology, the composing process, and their predecessors in the craft.

The material in the works that is most obviously mythic often takes a great deal of subtlety to interpret, as it communicates more through symbols and images than words. Such

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material cannot be understood as literally true. An aspect of the Mead Myth itself serves as a good example of this. Poetry is not literally the vomit of an eagle, and it is not obvious what meaning such an image supposed to convey. The rest of the Mead Myth is similar in its non-straightforwardness. Thus, if the Mead Myth is to be seen as a guide for the poet, it cannot be a literal one and must be seen as a symbolic one instead. Of course, it is possible that the Old Norse audience of the Mead Myth may have found its symbols to be more transparent than today’s readers.44

Such mythical analysis in this study will be most at the forefront in my look at the Mead Myth and the rest of Snorra Edda. Although it also underlies my view of Heimskringla and Egils saga, its influence will be less obvious there where the material may be read more literally in determining its message to skalds.

1.8 Other Analytical Tools
Beyond just looking and seeing what is in the text, both literally and mythically, there are some other analytical tools I will occasionally use to help with the analysis.

Wanner seeks to explain why Snorri wrote Snorra Edda, and uses Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital.45 Although I am not concerned here with the ‘why’ of the texts, Wanner’s approach is a useful tool. To the extent that Wanner is correct and Snorra Edda was a deliberate attempt to restore the cultural capital of skaldic poetry, one would expect that Snorri’s other works would be influenced by this motive and thus aid that enterprise. It is not absolutely critical, however, as the existence of the attempted skaldic revival is not in doubt. Torfi Tulinius also applies Bourdieu’s theories to Snorri and Egils saga, but their use on those subjects is more related to Snorri’s participation in the nascent Icelandic literary field.46 Since I am not trying to break new ground with regard to application of Bourdieu’s theories, I base my application of those theories to the three works in question on Wanner’s example, as it is more directly concerned with skaldic matters. I use that view as a lens for finding the vision of the skald. Of particular influence to me was Wanner’s argument “that Snorri not only felt himself as a skald deeply obligated to Óðinn, but that he spent a good deal of his literary

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44 However, Frank implies that the opposite was the case, that Snorri misinterpreted his sources, which suggests that any Mead Myth which he had access to was anything but transparent. See Frank, “Snorri and the Mead of Poetry,” 157.
45 Wanner, Snorri Sturluson and the Edda, 7–15.
46 See, for example, Torfi Tulinius, Enigma of Egill, 202–09.
career trying to convince others of the reality and significance of this obligation."47 A significant part of my approach to Óðinn in this study comes from that. Meylan, who also accepts Wanner's arguments, sees a conflation of poetry and magic in Snorra Edda, Ynglinga saga, and Egils saga for the purpose of strengthening the value of poetry, to make it more desirable for Norwegian kings to have it at their disposal and for Icelanders to use it to defend their communities.48 Thus, a focus on where poetry and magic overlap is also a part of my approach.

I make some hagiographical considerations at times, based on a study by Clunies Ross, where she notes parallels to hagiographic vita in Egils saga,49 and these will be most important in that saga. Óláfs saga ins helga does show aspects of hagiography as well, but mostly in the posthumous miracles, as the miraculous during his lifetime has clearly been toned down considerably.50 Yet the Separate Saga version may be read as a hagiography of the martyr passion type, showing Snorri’s likely awareness of the form.51 If other skalds or euhemerized gods can be likened to something foreshadowing saints, that would bear considerably on their status as potential role models for a 13th-century Christian skald.

As noted, the picture of the skald that emerges from these texts will be somewhat idealized. Thus, the work of other scholars on the literary and historical situation will be brought in at times to highlight the contrasts. They draw on a wider spectrum of primary sources than those considered here, yet have plenty to offer to this focused study. Notable scholars in these regards include Clunies Ross, Faulkes, Fidjestøl, Frank, Guðrún Nordal, Gurevich, Quinn, Torfi Tulinius, and Wanner.

At times, material from other literary accounts will be considered for the sake of contrast. For instance, the later Flateyjarbók redaction of the Separate Saga of St. Óláfr has an interpolation telling how Sigvatr acquired his poetic skills through eating the head of a special

47 Wanner, Snorri Sturluson and the Edda, 139.
fish, but Snorri omits any mention of this episode. This particular example might be explained by Snorri’s noted avoidance of supernatural material in *Heimskingla*, or perhaps a desire to not contradict his historicizing account of Óðinn as the source of poetry. Other contrasts will show expansions of themes found in the works or illuminate obscure aspects.

Lastly, I must make some brief miscellaneous remarks. Where it is necessary to distinguish between causal speakers of verse and those who compose praise poetry in service to a king or chieftain, I will aim to use ‘poet’ as a general term for the former and ‘skald’ for the latter, especially when it is meaningful to make the distinction. However, this is not always easy, as *skáld* was the general Old Norse word for ‘poet,’ regardless of one’s connection to a retinue. So, I will occasionally use ‘court skald’ where I feel absolute clarity is needed. Throughout this study, *Edda* always refers to *Snorra Edda*, which in other works is called the *Prose Edda*. Wherever I refer to the *Poetic Edda*, I will specifically call it the *Poetic Edda*.

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Chapter 2: *Snorra Edda*

They mixed honey with the blood and it turned into the mead whoever
drinks from which becomes a poet or scholar.

— Bragi in *Skáldskaparmál*53

2.1 Opening Remarks

In this look at *Snorra Edda*, my main focus is on the wealth of mythological material that would influence the would-be skald as to how he should think about his craft, himself, and his relation to the gods and ancestors. Much of it is subtle and veiled in the language of myth. The way that verse is used is another factor, along with some direct mentions of poets and poetry. Unlike my later chapters, this one is ordered by themes, not a broadly linear reading of the text. Whenever it is relevant to do so, I treat *Edda* as a completed whole that proceeds in the order of its usual presentation with the *Prologue* first.

Though the aim of this study is to focus on the non-compositional aspects of being a skald, how the compositional aspects are positioned to the skald is a part of that. For that purpose, on the function of *Edda* as a guide to composing, I take Quinn’s comment as a fair summary:

> If we read between the lines of Snorri’s *Edda*, we might paraphrase his poetic manifesto thus: to practise the skaldic art a poet needed to have an extensive repertoire of poetic circumlocutions and an understanding of the myths they referred to as well as a knowledge of dróttkvætt and its approved variants, to be employed in the standardized versions set out in the first part of Háttatal and with regard to the list of licences enumerated there. Metrical competence, then, depended on mastering a prescribed pattern and its modulations, whereas lexical competence required the assimilation of an extensive store of kenningar, heiti, and the mythic narratives that gave rise to them. Knowledge of the rhythms and verseforms used in previous compositions was a strand in the new skaldic

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syllabus, but Snorri explicitly marks the sixty types which may be followed as models . . . and specifies those that must not be.⁵⁴

My comments on these aspects will only be a very small part of what follows.

2.2 Remarks on the Use of Verse in Edda

The way that verse is used in Edda varies across the three parts which contain it, Gylfaginning, Skáldskaparmál, and Háttatal. In each case, the usage, in and of itself, has something to tell the would-be skald about his craft and his relation to the past.

Gylfaginning predominantly uses anonymous eddic verse (though see a later section for the exceptions) as authenticating verse for the mythological stories in much the same way that skaldic verse is used to substantiate the deeds of kings in Heimskringla. Völuspá and Grímnismál are even mentioned by name in this regard. The effect is to position these two poems, and other similar eddic poems by implication, as authoritative sources on the mythology for would-be skalds to know. If Edda provided the impetus for compiling eddic poems,⁵⁵ then one natural conclusion from that would be that the complier indeed saw those poems in exactly this way.

Skáldskaparmál, on the other hand, focuses on skaldic verse. It uses verse for perhaps three kinds of authenticating purposes, none of which are entirely like the usual historical authentication as seen in Heimskringla. As is well-known, the first purpose is illustrative, to provide precedents for the various kenning uses. I take the following as a fairly representative example:

Hvernig skal kenna sumar? Svá at kalla son Svásaðar ok líkn ormanna, grðr manna. Svá sem kvað Egill Skallagrímsson:

Upp skulum örum sverðum,
úlfstannlituðr, glitra;
eigum dáð at drýgja
í dalmiskunn fiska.

How shall summer be referred to? By calling it son of Svasud and comfort of the snakes, growth of men. As Egil Skallagrímsson said:

⁵⁵ Faulkes, introduction to Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning, xvi.
Stainer of wolf’s teeth [with blood, i.e. warrior], we shall wave our swords in
the sun, we have something to achieve in the valley-fish’s [snakes’] mercy [summer].

In such uses, which run into the hundreds, Snorri nearly always names a skald as the source. This mountain of skaldic quotations positions the past masters as appropriate role models for the new generation of skalds. Perhaps it was always like this, but one certainly notices the similarities to the approach of Latin grammar, which treated its past masters as role models for what to do and not to do. The Norse skáld and Latin auctores fulfilled the same functions for Norse and Latin grammatica, respectively: “they observed stringent metrical rules in their verse and alluded in their poetic imagery and kennings to pagan myth and legend.” Snorri has certainly made the most of this fact. Role models aside, the approach reminds the skald that he is joining a distinguished lineage. Snorri is not promoting anything revolutionary in this, for such a tendency to view verse as authoritative was already in Icelandic literature.

The second purpose is for authenticating traditional stories. As a representative example, one may take what Snorri says after telling the story of Þórr’s duel with Hrungnir, just before citing several stanzas of verse: “Eptir þessi sögu hefir ort Þjóðólfur hvinverski í Haustløng. Svá segir þar . . .” (“Thiodolf of Hvin has composed a passage based on this story in Haustlong. It says there . . .”). It cannot be authenticating verse in the usual sense, for that would imply that the named skald had personal, instead of traditional, knowledge of the mythological events. So instead, it authenticates the ancient pedigree of the story and shows that it is a part of the skaldic repertoire (instead of being something just made up), which suggests that new skalds may also compose on it and other such stories as part of their duties.

The third authenticating purpose is found with the tal (‘list’) stanzas. A single example should suffice:

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Enn skal telja
Ása heiti:
Yet shall be listed
names of Æsir.
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57 Guðrún Nordal, Tools of Literacy, 340.
58 For example, as seen in First Grammatical Treatise, ed. and trans. Einar Haugen, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1972), 18–21.
59 Snorri, Skáldskaparmál, ed. Faulkes, 1:22; Snorri, Edda, trans. Faulkes, 80.
There is Ygg and Thor
and Yngvi-Freyr,
Vidar and Baldr,
Vali and Heimdall.
Then there is Tyr and Niord,
I list Bragi next,
Hod, Forseti
Here is Loki last.

There are over one hundred such list stanzas near the end of *Skáldskaparmál*. They imply that this is an appropriate way for a skald to organize and learn such a vast word-hoard for *heití* and *kenningar*. They would likely be seen as traditional and authoritative, like the other verses cited in *Skáldskaparmál*.

The verse of *Háttatal* is exemplifying and of Snorri’s own creation, challenging the would-be skald with an exhaustive range of meters that he could potentially master. Snorri here positions himself as an authority, no less than the skalds quoted in *Skáldskaparmál*. One supposes that older poets would not have recognized all of the fine distinctions here, especially since it is usually thought that Snorri deliberately inflated his tally, making separate forms from every peculiarity he found. So, for the 13th century, the skald’s capacity to make fine distinctions of form is implied to be an essential part of his training. There is, however, something that strengthens the position of the past skalds as authorities in the tradition: the naming of verse forms after several skalds. Most notable for this study are those named after Torf-Einarr (who is a jarl in *Heimskringla*), Egill, and Bragi. As a blending of the oral and the literate, Quinn notes: “As prosimetrum, *Háttatal* gives voice to two contemporary, but dissimilar, traditions: the oral tradition of virtuoso skaldic composition, in which innovation was an inherent form of display which Snorri clearly delights in practising, and the written tradition of pedagogy, in which the definition and naming of types was paramount.”

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matter of the veracity of the praise in Håttatal, Wanner sees Snorri avoiding praise of Hákon for things he did not do, just as Snorri would advise in the Heimskringla prologue.64

2.3 Prologue and Euhemerization

The main contribution of Snorri’s Prologue to Edda seems to be providing a euhemeristic framework. In this, I agree with Wanner who sees the euhemerizing as not merely for making stories about the mythology acceptable to Christians, but also for establishing Óðinn and the Æsir as distinguished ancestors in support of the other parts of Edda.65 It is in the Prologue that various gods are equated with characters from Trojan legend, who are then said to have left Troy for the North, fathered many royal lines in Scandinavia and elsewhere in Europe, and were so magnificent that they were mistaken for gods.66 The mistake seems to be justified on the grounds that, after early generations deliberately forgot the name of God, their innocent descendants, still having the power of reason, concluded that there must be someone or something in charge of creation and eventually attributed this rulership to the Æsir as they passed through, since they had not yet been provided with the Christian revelation which they surely would have recognized as truth if they had known it. So, having shifted the blame for the misunderstanding completely off of the Icelanders and the euhemerized Æsir, Snorri clears the way to honor them as noble ancestors and the source of the distinguished poetic art. More than that, however, Snorri ties this into known history through his mention of the poem Háleygjatal and that Norwegian rulers trace their ancestry to persons in it.67

There are two other euhemerizing sections in Edda. The first is the epilogue of Gylfaginning, a passage that adds nothing to the mythology. It says that Gylfi has told others of what he heard and saw — the entire mythology of Gylfaginning. Then, it is narrated that:

Æsir . . . gefa nǫfn þessi hin sǫmu er aðr eru nefnd mǫnnum ok stǫðum þeim er þar váru, til þess at þá er langar stundir liði at menn skyldu ekki ifask í at allir væri eínr, þeir Æsir er núa var frá sagt ok þessir er þá váru þau sǫmu nǫfn gefin.

The Æsir . . . assigned those same names that were mentioned above to the people

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64 Wanner, Snorri Sturluson and the Edda, 106.
65 Ibid., 146–58, where Wanner provides an extensive discussion of the euhemerizing, upon which my short discussion in this section is based.
67 Snorri, Prologue and Gylfaginning, ed. Faulkes, 6; Snorri, Edda, trans. Faulkes, 5.
and places that were there [in Sweden], so that when long periods of time had
passed men should not doubt that they were all the same, those Æsir about whom
stories were told above and those who were now given the same names.68

This can have no other purpose but reinforcing the historicity that Snorri is promoting here,
that the readers should take the gods as human ancestors. Thus, recounting their tales is
positioned as no different than doing the same for Norwegian kings or Icelanders. After the
narratives of Þórunn’s abduction and the Mead Myth, he reinforces this point in
Skáldskaparmál, arguing for the preservation of these stories so that poetry may benefit from
their use, and asserting that various legends, such as Þórr battling Miðgarðsormr, are actually
events from the Trojan war.69

The message for the would-be skalds in all of this is clear. The gods are to be believed
in as human ancestors, and their stories may be honored and used as being equal to those of
the Trojans which Christianity had already accommodated and accepted. In Heimskringla,
Ynglinga saga will expand on this with further details of the gods as royal ancestors, whose
history leads to the line of Norwegian kings. Though euhemerized, I will still refer to the gods
as gods in what follows, in order to distinguish them from ordinary humans — a distinction
which comes through in Edda in spite of the euhemerizing.

2.4 Óðinn: The Skald’s Highest God

In this manual aimed at skalds, Óðinn’s position in the pantheon is clear: “Svá heitir sá maðr
er vör vitum mestan ok ágæztan, ok vel megu þér hann láta svá heita” (“This is the name of
the one who is the greatest and most glorious that we know, and you would do well to agree to
call him that too”).70 As if a reminder, it is later pointed out: “Óðinn er œztr ok elztr
Ásanna” (“Odin is the highest and most ancient of the Æsir”).71 This is in answer to the
question: “Hverir eru Æsir þeir er mǫnnum er skyld at trúa á?” (“Which are the Æsir that men
ought to believe in?”).72 If that were not enough, there is also poetic support for this, in a
verse that Snorri quotes from Grímnismál, positioning it as the words of the Æsir themselves:

68 Snorri, Prologue and Gylfaginning, ed. Faulkes, 54–55; Snorri, Edda, trans. Faulkes, 57. Bracketed
text by Faulkes.
70 Snorri, Prologue and Gylfaginning, ed. Faulkes, 11; Snorri, Edda, trans. Faulkes, 11.
Askr Yggdrasils, the ash Yggdrasil,
hann er œztr viða, this is the foremost of trees,
en Skíðblaðnir skipa, and Skíðbladnir of ships,
Óðinn Ása, Odin of the Æsir,
en jóa Sleipnir, of horses Sleipnir,
Bifröst brúa, Bifrost of bridges,
en Bragi skálda. and Bragi of poets.  

It is certainly useful to remind the would-be skald of this, who would realize that it was a poet
who composed these words, indicating an actual attitude that poets took regarding Óðinn (and
Bragi, dealt with in a later section).

However, except for the Mead Myth, there is not altogether that much material in
Edda about Óðinn that pertains directly to poetry. He is a god of many things besides that. In
the guise of Hár, Jafnhár, and Þríði, he is a master of lore about the mythology. From the
details of Valhöll and Óðinn’s lordship in it, whether provided by Snorri or quoted from
Grímnismál, it is clear that in the narrative of Gylfaginning, Óðinn is much more closely
connected to the kings and chieftains that skalds would praise. This would make Óðinn the
divine patron that corresponds to the skald’s earthly patron. Snorri indeed portrays skalds as
receiving a gift from that divine patron when he says: “Suttunga mjöð gaf Óðinn Æsunum ok
þeim mǫnnum er yrkja kunnu” (“Odin gave Suttung’s mead to the Æsir and to those people
who are skilled at composing poetry”). Although in various tales (such as one in
Heimskringla, dealt with later) Óðinn appears to kings and entertains or confounds them, it
is always as an absolute outsider. He never takes the role of a court skald himself by offering
praise poetry to a lord. That would make him subordinate to that lord, which would contradict
him being the highest and most exemplary lord who hosts the greatest kings and heroes in
Valhöll. Thus, the role of court skald in divine society must belong to another god, who must
now be considered.

73 Snorri, Prologue and Gylfaginning, ed. Faulkes, 34; Snorri, Edda, trans. Faulkes, 34.
74 Most particularly, Snorri, Prologue and Gylfaginning, ed. Faulkes, 32–34; Snorri, Edda, trans.
Faulkes, 32–34.
75 Snorri, Skáldskaparmál, ed. Faulkes, 1:5; Snorri, Edda, trans. Faulkes, 64.
76 For a discussion of four such tales in which Óðinn or an Óðinn-like figure appears, see Merrill
Kaplan, Thou Fearful Guest: Addressing the Past in Four Tales in Flateyjarbók (Helsinki: Academia
Scientiarum Fennica, 2011).
2.5 Bragi of the Æsir: Divine Role Model

If Óðinn has in his halls any court skalds who are gods instead of humans, Bragi is certainly the only possible candidate for that role in these three works (and outside of them as well). So, he is worth a close look as a divine role model, euhemerized or not, even though he is never depicted as composing praise poetry for Óðinn. However, the question of whether or not Bragi the god is the deified Bragi inn gamli Boddason is one which I will not attempt to settle here.⁷⁷ Snorri, though, does seem to keep the two reasonably separate in Edda, and I will state my position on the ambiguous cases in the discussion that follows.

I start with that Grímnismál quote above about the various foremost things. If it were referring to the human Bragi, it would be quite exceptional, as all other persons and things mentioned in that stanza pertain to the supernatural world, and this holds also for the lore in the rest of the poem. While it is true that Snorri does not quote the whole of Grímnismál as it is found in the Poetic Edda,⁷⁸ what he does quote and how he uses it gives no indication that anything of the human world is meant by any of it. So, not ruling out the deification possibility, I consider the verse a reference to the divine Bragi. Likewise, the tal quote from earlier in this chapter clearly reckons a Bragi among the Æsir. So, among the gods, there is indeed a Bragi who is the best of skalds. The Grímnismál quote also implies that despite all his associations with poetry, Óðinn is not chiefly reckoned as a skald or poet himself, because otherwise he would have to be seen as a lesser one than Bragi.⁷⁹

More details are in that above-mentioned list of “Æsir that men ought to believe in,” where Snorri includes Bragi, and says of him that:

Hann er ágætr at speki ok mest at málsnild ok orðfimi. Hann kann mest af skáldskap, ok af honum er bragr kallaðr skáldskapr, ok af hans nafni er sá kallaðr bragr karla eða kvenna er orðsnild hefir framar en aðrir, kona eða karlmaðr.

He is renowned for wisdom and especially for eloquence and command of language. Especially he is knowledgeable about poetry, and because of him poetry

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⁷⁹ I am inclined to take this stanza as possible evidence for seeing Bragi as a hypostasis of Óðinn, similar to how Vili and Vé are usually considered, thus resolving any paradoxes or contradictions inherent in Óðinn being a lesser skald. However, I wish to avoid tackling theological intricacies here.
is called brag, and from his name a person is said to be a brag [chief] of men or women who has eloquence beyond others, whether it is a woman or a man.\textsuperscript{80} Eloquence and wisdom are qualities that will be seen repeatedly in the skalds of Heimskringla and Egils saga. There is a not-so-subtle suggestion here that the skilled poet is deserving of being called after a god, even though Snorri’s euhemeristic frame positions Bragi and the other Æsir as distinguished ancestors. In this, Bragi is certainly portrayed as a god of poetry in ways that Óðinn is not.

Snorri immediately follows this with mention of Iðunn, Bragi’s wife:

Kona hans er Iðunn. Hon varðeitir í eski sínu epli þau er goðin skulu á bita þá er þau eldask, ok verða þá allir ungir, ok svá mun vera allt til ragnarókr.

Iðunn is his wife. She keeps in her casket apples which the gods have to feed on when they age, and then they all become young, and so it will go on right up to Ragnarok.\textsuperscript{81}

In the Icelandic Grágás law code, it is noted that the husband shall manage the property in a marriage.\textsuperscript{82} Thus, Bragi has quite an impressive property to manage here: the source of immortality. The skald emulates this access to immortality by dispensing praise poems to notable persons so that they will be remembered by future generations. Finally, mention of Ragnarök characterizes this immortality as lasting all the way to the end of the world.

Further details are found among the kennings Snorri gives for Bragi:

Hvernig skal kenna Braga? Svá at kalla hann Iðunnar ver, frumsmið bragar ok hinn síðskeggja Ás; af hans nafni er sá kallaðr skeggbragi er mikit skegg hefir; ok sonr Óðins.

How shall Bragi be referred to? By calling him Iðunn’s husband, inventor of poetry (brag) and the long-bearded As. It is from his name that the expression ‘beard-bragi’ comes for someone who has a big beard. Also son of Odin.\textsuperscript{83}

The physical detail of Bragi’s beard is the only such detail of his appearance that is given in Edda. Positioning him as the inventor of poetry seems strange, especially when the origin of


\textsuperscript{81} Snorri, Prologue and Gylfaginning, ed. Faulkes, 25; Snorri, Edda, trans. Faulkes, 25.


\textsuperscript{83} Snorri, Skáldskaparmál, ed. Faulkes, 1:19; Snorri, Edda, trans. Faulkes, 76.
that art is attributed to Óðinn, both elsewhere in *Edda* and in *Heimskringla.* Yet the detail is one that reinforces his importance to the would-be skald.

The frame narrative of *Skáldskaparmál,* though it is not sustained throughout the work, provides another look at Bragi the god. It is set in Valhöll, at a feast of the gods where Ægir has been welcomed. Bragi is positioned as knowledgeable about poetry (as was said of him in *Gylfaginning*) and the stories that kennings are based on by answering questions about verse distinctions and the origin of poetry. Bragi’s instruction of Ægir is comparable to Óðinn’s instruction of Gylfi, thus positioning him as an authority figure on par with Óðinn for the readers of *Edda.* If Snorri had explicitly made Ægir a student of versification in the frame, Bragi’s image of skaldic authority would have been further strengthened, although several of Ægir’s questions strongly imply it. However, in manuscripts in which *Háttatal* follows *Skáldskaparmál,* one might see its frame narrative as a continuation of Ægir’s questions and Bragi’s answers, but this time on poetic meter. Given no authoritative statement about who is asking and answering when *Háttatal* starts, it is possible that a reader would at least subconsciously supply the identities last stated in *Skáldskaparmál.*

In *Skáldskaparmál,* Snorri quotes a verse from Eyvindr skáldaspillir that mentions Bragi:

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Hermóðr ok Bragi               “Hermod and Bragi,”
(kvað Hroptatýr)                              said Hropta-Tyr [Odin],
gangið í gögn grami               “go to meet the prince,
þvat konungr ferr                   for a king is coming
sá er kappi þýkkir                  who is to be considered a hero,
til hallar hinig.                     here to this hall.”
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This stanza is from *Hákonarmál,* about Hákon inn góði’s reception in Valhöll, which Snorri quotes in full in *Heimskringla.* It is possible that it is the human Bragi who is meant, but I think the divine Bragi is more likely, given his positioning alongside Hermóðr, who Snorri

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84 This is another detail that might imply Bragi as a hypostasis of Óðinn.
treats as divine,\textsuperscript{90} but this also does not rule out deification.\textsuperscript{91} The stanzas of \textit{Hákonarmál} after this one confirm that Bragi has done as asked and greeted Hákon (although strangely, Hermóðr is not mentioned further). Thus, he serves as a messenger for his lord in greeting distinguished guests. Human skalds in \textit{Heimskringla} and \textit{Egils saga} will also be seen serving as messengers for their lords.

While none of this proves that Bragi was thought of as Óðinn’s court skald, much of it is suggestive of it, especially since, whether human or divine, a poet named Bragi is indeed sitting on his benches, just as the human halls that will be seen in \textit{Heimskringla} and \textit{Egils saga} have poets on their benches. In any case, his positioning vis-à-vis the poetic craft makes him an obvious role model and contributes to the subtle suggestion that the would-be skald should aim to know his material as well as his exemplar. By not settling the deification question while having material that may imply it, Snorri suggests that the regard for skalds and poetry in the past was high enough for elevating the best to godhood. Though godhood is not possible for the 13th-century Christian skald, the temptation of the implied fame is.

\section*{2.6 Bragi inn gamli Boddason: Orienting and Defining the Skald}

If the two verses discussed above, Bragi as foremost of skalds and Bragi greeting Hákon in Valhöll, are references to the human Bragi after all, they show that their composers regarded Bragi as distinguished beyond all others, as the former verse has virtually elevated him to supernatural status, and the latter verse would make him the only named human skald in Valhöll, one who is positioned quite close to Óðinn. All the remaining mentions of Bragi in \textit{Edda} are clearly verse citations attributed to the human skald. Most are simply cited to support various kennings. On the whole, the remembrance of Bragi reminds the would-be skald of how far back his tradition goes. Yet two verses in particular have extra importance.

\textsuperscript{90} However, a reference to Hermóðr in \textit{Hyndluljóð} could well be to a mythological hero, given his apposition to Sigmundr there. For an edition of that poem, see \textit{Eddukveðií}, 1:460–69, with the mention of Hermóðr on 1:460. This may suggest that both Bragi and Hermóðr have been deified.

\textsuperscript{91} The poem \textit{Eiríksmál}, about Eiríkr blöðøx, would seem to have the same Bragi on similarly close terms with Óðinn in Valhöll. It is not certain whether that Bragi is human or divine either, but I think the way that Bragi mentions Baldr there makes it more likely that it is the divine Bragi. See \textit{Eiríksmál}, ed. R. D. Fulk, in \textit{Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035}, ed. Diana Whaley, 2 vols., Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 2:1003–13.
Bragi is the first human skald to be mentioned in *Edda*, for a verse citation. Curiously, this same verse is the first one quoted in *Heimskringla*, providing a link to that narrative as well. In both places, it is treated as an authenticating stanza. In *Gylfaginning*, it serves to establish the frame narrative for Gylfi’s questioning of Hárr, Jafnhár, and Þríði. The implication may be that Snorri’s readers should take the *Gylfaginning* version of events as a true history no less than that of *Heimskringla*, one that fills in missing details. Reinforcing this historicity, a verse from Þjóðólfr ór Hvini is used not long after to authenticate the portrayal of Gylfi’s arrival at a hall as though it were the historical source for Valhöll. Thus, history via verse, whether real or mythical, is implied as starting with this earliest-known skald. It has been suggested, although certainly not conclusively, that the Bragi verse may be an interpolation in *Edda*. However, if it is truly an interpolation, it reinforces the historicizing tendency anyway, and the texts of *Edda* and *Heimskringla* themselves are likely to blame for inspiring it. It would then be a good example of a medieval author improving on traditional materials in a way that reinforces what is already present.

Bragi’s most remarkable verse is found at the beginning of the *ókend heiti* section in *Skáldskaparmál*. With it, Bragi defines a poet:

| Poets call me                               | Skáld kalla mik       |
| Vidur’s [Odin’s] thought-smith              | skapsmið Viðurs,      |
| getter of Gaut’s [Odin’s] gift              | Gauts gjafrotuð,      |
| lack-nought hero                            | grepp óhneppan,       |
| server of Ygg’s [Odin’s] ale                | Yggs ðóðera,          |
| song-making Modi                           | óðs skap-Móða,        |
| skilled smith of rhyme                      | hagsmið bragar.       |
| what is a poet other than that              | Hvat er skáld nema þat? |

The smith and song-making lines (2, 6, and 7) suggest a craftsmanship approach to poetry, which I will connect to the dwarves in the discussion of the Mead Myth later. The lines that

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96 See also ibid., 114, where Lindow takes a similar view of the prospective interpolation.
use *heiti* for Óðinn (2, 3, and 5) reinforce the poet’s connection to him. Line two indicates the skald’s dedication to him or working for him. Line three reminds the skald that Óðinn is the source of poetry (seemingly a contradiction to the divine Bragi being its inventor). Line five also suggests Óðinn as the source of poetry, and reminds one of the Mead Myth via alcoholic drink. The verse encourages poets to view their art as produced both through craftsmanship and through the supernatural connection to Óðinn. Thus, the ideal poet uses both approaches, not merely specializing in one or the other. Whether genuine or invented later, the authority of a verse like this is enhanced by its perceived antiquity.

### 2.7 Other Notes on Skalds and Poetry

There is a verse by Hofgarða-Refr that Snorri quotes, and part of it is suggestive of skaldic training: “Opt kom . . . hollr at helgu fulli hrafn-Ásar mér” (“Often the kind man brought me to the raven-god’s [Odin’s] holy drink [instructed me in poetry]”).  

Gurevich, however, notes that this is the only time someone tells about how he learns verse-making in this culture. She concludes that “the skalds neither wanted nor recognized any mediators in their personal relations with Óðinn” and that this was done “to emphasize the exceptional quality and value of their own poetry and the individual nature of their art.” Although Gurevich considers the situation diachronically, Snorri does not say anything against such a view for the 13th century, even though he is writing an instruction manual for skalds. Indeed, his forceful euhemerization could be seen as an attempt to preserve such a view with respect to Óðinn in whatever way was possible. If one takes the view that the Mead Myth was largely Snorri’s own creation, that would strengthen the case for seeing deliberate action on the part of Snorri in this matter.

_Edda_ itself suggests that the way of learning skaldic verse was in the process of changing from an oral approach to a literate approach. Guðrún Nordal observes that the two would have existed side by side when she says: “The existence of a systematic study of skaldic verse in the context of _grammatica_ does not exclude the active study of the art form

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100 Ibid., 67.

101 Ibid., 68.
outside the schoolroom. It is likely that poets continued to learn their art in the same way as had been the practice of illiterate poets of the past.”¹⁰² Later, in discussing Egils saga, I will note a particularly famous passage that may shed some light on how those illiterate poets learned their art.

The mention of Óðr is one the more subtle messages that would-be skalds might get from Edda. About Freyja, Snorri says:

Hon giptisk þeim manni er Óðr heitir. Dóttir þeira heitir Hnoss. Hon er svá fógr at af hennar nafni eru hnossir kallaðar þat er fagrt er ok gersemlikt. Óðr fór í braut langar leiðir, en Freyja grætr eptir, en tár hennar er gull rauitt. Freyja á morg nöfn, en sú er sók til þess at hon gaf sér ýmis heiti er hon för með ökunnnum þjóðum at leita Óðs.

She was married to someone called Od. Hnoss is the name of their daughter. She is so beautiful that from her name whatever is beautiful and precious is called hnossir [treasures]. Od went off on long travels, and Freyja stayed behind weeping, and her tears are red gold. Freyja has many names, and the reason for this is that she adopted various names when she was travelling among strange peoples looking for Od.¹⁰³ Freyja’s behavior here is unmotivated,¹⁰⁴ and mysterious. However, whether Snorri invented this detail or it was traditional, one can assign to him a motive for purveying it. Beyond being the name of a relatively unknown god who is usually thought to be connected to Óðinn in some manner, óðr is also a common noun whose meanings include ‘poetry.’ That the most sexually desirable goddess should weep in the absence of poetry and go off journeying in pursuit of it reminds one of the kind of modern marketing that uses sex to sell things. In this fashion, Freyja’s search provides further subtle encouragement to the prospective skald.

Alternatively, this passage might be looked to for a metaphorical statement of what poetry is. Though equating the skald’s male lord to a goddess is sexually problematic, an interpretation of the metaphor may be made with it. The treasure which is the skald’s reward is then the ‘offspring’ of his poetry and the lord he serves. In the absence of poetry to reward,

¹⁰² Guðrún Nordal, Tools of Literacy, 118.
Freyja’s tears may be taken as the accumulation of gold that instead would be distributed. However, if one equates the goddess to a human woman, one might see a parallel to the songs of a troubadour and the woman they are dedicated to, which may result in a gift or other reward from her.

_Skaldskaparmál_ gives Óðinn and poetry pride of place in leading off the section for kennings. Their positioning encourages the skald to take the Mead Myth seriously, and the verse citations are presented as evidence that the elder poets did so. They also reinforce the connection to Óðinn for the budding skald. Although Snorri made a demarcation between the Óðinn kennings and the poetry kennings, there is nevertheless considerable overlap between the two, as many verses in each set contain kennings for both, showing how inseparable they are. This section of kennings may have another effect as well. Their verses are the sort that Faulkes is referring to when he says:

> One remarkable feature of skaldic poetry . . . is that it contains a great deal of self-reference and that it often makes both the poem and the poet into topics. . . . A surprising number of such passages have been preserved, enough to make it clear that viking poems were often as much affirmations of the importance of the poet and his own control of words as of the importance of the king who was the ostensible subject. Although many of these passages amount simply to the traditional request for silence, the point is that the poet, arriving from Iceland in a foreign court uninvited and without particular status, gets a hearing and achieves status thereby.

By using quotations of past skalds to make such points (perhaps inadvertently), Snorri appeals to the would-be skald’s desire for status and importance while at the same time suggesting that it is a time-honored tradition.

Reinforcing this pride of place, the _ókend heiti_ section starts with _heiti_ for poetry. These poetry _heiti_, being non-periphrastic, are a useful look at the purposes of poetry: “Hver eru ókend heiti skáldskaparins? Hann heitir bragr ok hróðr, óðr, mærð, lof” (“What non-_________

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107 Snorri, _Skáldskaparmál_, ed. Faulkes, 1:83; Snorri, _Edda_, trans. Faulkes, 132. No individual gods are distinguished in the _ókend heiti_ section, so Óðinn’s absence from it is not a problem.
periphrastic terms are there for poetry? It is called *bragr* and fame, song, encomium, praise*).*

The connection of *bragr* to Bragi by Snorri has already been noted, but there are perhaps also tones of ‘best’ and ‘chieftain’ with it. *Óðr*, however, has a different range: ‘mind, wit, soul, sense’ in addition to ‘song, poetry’ and ‘frenzy,’ making a connection to the mental or spiritual aspects of a human. The remaining three terms are synonyms, more or less, defying any exact translation in this context. *Hróðr* is ‘praise’, but has definite notes of ‘fame, reputation,’ while *mærð* is ‘praise, glory, encomium,’ and *lof* is ‘praise, good report, eulogy.’ Putting them together, however, reveals a clear trend: they reinforce the use of poetry for praise and enhancing the fame of its object. Underscoring that point, Wanner notes that Snorri himself frequently refers to poetry by these last three words in *Háttatal*, suggesting that “Snorri meant for Hákon and Skúli to take this association very literally.” Students of *Edda* would be exposed to the same message.

Later, Snorri points out that: “Skáld heita greppar ok rétt er í skáldskap at kenna svá hvern mann ef vill” (“Poets are called *greppar*, and it is normal in poetry to refer thus to any man if desired”). Unfortunately, this reveals nothing. *Greppr* simply seems to be another word for ‘poet.’ Faulkes leaves it untranslated here, but renders it as ‘hero’ in Bragi’s verse above, and ‘poet’ in a different place,* suggesting the impossibility of getting anything new out of it.

Since many of the kennings for poetry equate it to an alcoholic drink, it is worth looking at the occurrences of alcoholic drinks in the narratives of *Gylfaginning*. Snorri quotes from *Grímnismál* in describing Valhöll and says that *Óðinn* lives on wine alone.* This may suggest that *Óðinn* is quite fond of hearing poetry in addition to being its creator — proper behavior for a distinguished lord. Similarly, the goat Heiðrún produces mead for the Einherjar to drink,* which may also construe these great heroes as fond of poetry. Indeed, prior to literacy in the North, it would have been one of the primary means by which a hero’s deeds

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110 Wanner, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda*, 137.


would be remembered, sustaining their ‘existence’ after death. All this may subtly encourage
the audience for *Edda* to think of themselves as enjoying a drink fit for gods and heroes when
consuming poetry. The poet himself emulates the essential figure who can produce such a
marvelous drink. Perhaps somewhat comically, it is a goat being emulated in this case, though
Snorri has Gylfi, under the guise of Gangleri, say: “Þat er þeim geysi haglig geit. Forkunnar
gôdr viôr mun þat vera er hon bitr af.” (“That is a terribly handy goat for them. It must be a
jolly good tree that it is feeding on”).¹¹⁵ That tree, Læraðr, is usually identified with
Yggdrasill.¹¹⁶ This tale of the goat suggests that by feeding on the leaves of Yggdrasill, poetry
can be produced — a metaphor with similarities to the creation of the Poetic Mead from
Kvasir’s blood in that the leaves are a raw material used in its production. The leaves of
Yggdrasill might then represent the mythological stories that provide the basis for kennings
and the knowledge of the events to be commemorated, which the skald ‘digests’ to produce a
poem. Considering that goats are clean animals in the Bible, it makes a striking parallel to
how, in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, Cædmon transformed sacred lore, such as biblical stories,
into poetry “like, as it were, a clean animal chewing the cud.”¹¹⁷

2.8 Analysis of the Mead Myth

Harris notes: “Skalds speak often of composing as vomiting up the mead of poetry, just as
Odin did near the end of the myth; but whether regurgitating or stealing, the skald goes
beyond *imitatio* or drama to the actual reliving of a sacral moment.”¹¹⁸ Here, however, I go
further and ask how else the poets might be emulating Snorri’s Mead Myth and what
correspondences to the craft of the poet it contains and how emulation of it would work. I will
draw upon the stories of two poets, the Norse Hallbjørn and the Anglo-Saxon Cædmon, in
elucidating some of the details.

In Snorri’s frame narrative in *Skáldskaparmál*, Ægir asks Bragi where poetry comes
from.¹¹⁹ Stephens observes that: “The god Bragi replies with a full account not, as we would
expect today, of the creative process but of the making and winning of the mead which is

¹¹⁶ Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 158.
¹¹⁷ Deuteronomy 14:4–8 (New Revised Standard Version); Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English
(London: Eyre Methuen, 1979), 723. See also my discussion of the Mead Myth below.
¹¹⁸ Harris, “‘Myth to Live By’ in *Sonatorrek*,” 160.
poetry in a quite concrete sense.”

I suggest, however, that one may indeed see an account of the creative process in this myth, though it is a highly allusive one that requires some comparative material to make complete sense of.

First, since Kvasir is so critical to the creation of the Poetic Mead, it is worth a look at the other brief mention of him in Edda. This is in connection with the final capture and binding of Loki. Loki has burned a fishing net in a fire. Kvasir, described as the wisest of all, analyzes the ashes left in this fire, and determines what was burned and what it was for. This may be taken as a general metaphor for the wisdom required for a sort of deductive reasoning or an inspired interpretive ability that can reconstruct the past by looking at its obscure traces in the present moment — the sort of work that scholars engage in, or what Snorri has done in piecing together Edda. It is at least this sort of wisdom that Kvasir represents as an ingredient of the Poetic Mead.

Now I give a summary of Snorri’s Mead Myth with an eye to its crucial symbolic aspects. Here, I endeavor to keep to symbolic interpretations that are uncomplicated and hopefully uncontroversial. It should be noted that Snorri really gives two mead myths. The first is the creation of the Poetic Mead and the second is Óðinn’s winning of it. Their structures are sufficiently distinct such that one may see them as two different pathways for obtaining poetry.

The creation of the Poetic Mead is the first mead myth, and it may be broken into three steps.

1. The Æsir and Vanir end their war, spit into a vat, and create Kvasir. This represents a reconciliation or synthesis of opposing forces that results in wisdom.

2. The personified wisdom is then slain by dwarves, who extract his blood. The blood represents the purest, most essential essence of the wisdom, with all the trappings removed. The dwarves represent what is necessary for the extraction of pure wisdom from the form that it is embodied in — an analytic principle of sorts.

3. This pure essence of wisdom is then blended with honey, which represents sweetness, and the mixture is fermented into mead. Here the dwarves represent the principle of

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123 I use ‘Mead Myth’ when referring to the tale as a whole, and ‘mead myth(s)’ when referring to the two significant parts that I discern here.
craftsmanship in blending and fermenting wisdom and sweetness. This produces something beautiful and useful — the sort of craftsmanship that is typical of dwarves in the mythology.

Of the finished product, Snorri says it is “mjǫðr sá er hverr er af drekkur verðr skáld eða fræðamaðr” (“the mead whoever drinks from which becomes a poet or scholar”). However, it is clear from the way that he interprets the story that this mead is also considered to literally be poetry, as Snorri says: “Af þessu kollum vör skáldskap Kvasís blóð eða dverga drekku” (“That is why we call poetry Kvasir’s blood or dwarfs’ drink”). Indeed, few would dispute the notion that some of the best poetry is wisdom blended with sweetness using consummate craftsmanship.

Before the action gets to the second mead myth, the dwarves are forced to surrender the mead to Suttungr as compensation for a crime. Suttungr then hides the mead deep in a mountain and sets his daughter to guard it. Though Snorri does not say how, it is clear that Óðinn learns of the mead and sets out to obtain it.

Now I turn to the Winning of the Poetic Mead. The formula of this second mead myth is more complex than the first one, and though interpretation here is not quite as straightforward, it too can be broken into three steps.

1. Óðinn leaves home. After arranging the deaths of Baugi’s thralls, he performs hard labor for Baugi by taking their place. Ultimately, in exchange for this, Baugi opens for him a passage into the mountain to where the mead is kept. Stated symbolically, Óðinn goes outside the boundaries of the conventional world and persists through drudgery, resulting in access to an otherworldly realm.

2. Óðinn meets Gunnlöð and they have sexual intercourse. This is another synthesis of opposites, positioned as a prerequisite to obtaining the mead, although Snorri does not say why. Here, also, I construe these opposites as the conventional world and the other world, which Óðinn and Gunnlöð represent as denizens of them, respectively. Other

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124 Snorri, Skáldskaparmál, ed. Faulkes, 1:3; Snorri, Edda, trans. Faulkes, 62.
126 Schjødt suggests seeing their intercourse as a prerequisite for Óðinn to ‘give birth’ to the mead by vomiting it later, a view that is compatible with my interpretation here. Jens Peter Schjødt, Initiation between Two Worlds: Structure and Symbolism in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion, trans. Victor Hansen (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2008), 166.
interpretations of this pair of opposites are possible, but this focus on conventional world versus other world has comparative applications that will soon be apparent.

3. Óðinn then drinks the mead, transforms into an eagle, and flies back to Ásgarðr, chased by Suttungr. On the way, he excretes a disregarded portion of mead, which poetasters receive. However, the majority of it he vomits back up in Ásgarðr, where he proceeds to share it with gods and skilled human poets. This represents a return from the other world to the conventional world and the distribution of what was gained in the journey.

Suttungr’s chase suggests that the return of the treasure from the other world is not a fait accompli, but something that can potentially fail. The poetasters’ portion suggests that the journey may also produce an inferior product that is analogous to the excrement of eagles.\(^\text{127}\)

As before, Snorri refers to the mead here as both poetry itself and a drink that makes one a poet, implying that this is how Óðinn became the first poet among the gods.

Other stories of the gaining of poetic gifts have strong structural parallels to the mead myths just outlined. The story of Hallbjørn from *þórleifs þátr jarlsskálds* is one of them.\(^\text{128}\)

In it, Hallbjørn gains skaldic skill in a manner similar to the second mead myth. He does this by going beyond the boundaries of the conventional world, which is represented here by his being at the grave mound. He persists through the drudgery of his vain attempts at composing verse and in sleeping on the mound night after night. Like Óðinn, the combination ultimately proves sufficient, as he gains access to the otherworldly realm when the mound dweller visits him in a dream. Unlike Gunnlöð, the mound dweller does not give him a literal drink of mead. Instead, he gives him a verse, and I agree with Gurevich in seeing this as a suitable equivalent to mead.\(^\text{129}\)

Hallbjørn then returns to his own world with this ‘mead’ by successfully remembering the verse upon waking up. He then becomes a skald from this drink of mead and proceeds to share it by composing and reciting poetry to others.

In the Anglo-Saxon story of Cædmon,\(^\text{130}\) though it is somewhat distant from the Norse material, there are parallels to both mead myths, but in reverse order. Cædmon is said to have

\(^{127}\) Though Snorri does not use explicit words for eagle excrement here, it is clear his contemporaries understood that, as shown by a verse that equated Snorri’s own poetry with such excrement. Quinn, “Skaldic Pedagogy,” 80–81 discusses this verse, quoting it from *Sturlunga saga*, 1:278–79.


\(^{129}\) Gurevich, “Skaldic Training,” 68.

left a drinking party on one occasion in shame and frustration on account of not being able to
sing or recite poems. From there he goes to a cattle shed to sleep alone. This change of venue
is a rough parallel to going outside the boundaries of the conventional world, especially
insofar as the convivial drinking hall was seen as an ideal center of social life. Although there
is no mention of drudgery on his part, Cædmon nevertheless accesses the other world when an
angel visits him in his dream. Instead of directly giving him a verse, the angel bids him to
sing, and he is suddenly able to sing a poem that he never heard before. Like Hallbjǫrn, he
returns to his own world with this mead by successfully remembering the verse upon waking.

The next portion of Cædmon’s story gives a possibility for interpreting some aspects
of the first mead myth above. In order to compose his further poetry, Bede says he listened to
biblical stories or other sacred lore, and “like, as it were, a clean animal chewing the cud, he
turned it into most harmonious song, . . . sweetly singing it.”\footnote{Bede, Ecclesiastical History, 723.} Thus, he blends wisdom,
represented by the sacred lore, and sweetness, which is implied by the finished product being
described as harmonious, as well as his manner of singing.

With the help of these two stories, I now set forth how the two mead myths correspond
to creative processes. For enacting the model of the first mead myth, the poet needs wisdom.
The myth suggests that the poet could produce this himself through a reconciling of opposing
forces. Such wisdom could have the character of the deductive reasoning or inspired
interpretive ability mentioned earlier. Alternately, he can obtain existing wisdom, just as the
dwarves do so by capturing Kvasir. Transposing the example of Cædmon just described, I
reckon that at least one species of wisdom that the Norse poet could blend with sweetness is
that which is contained in the traditional stories and mythology. The whole of Gylfaginning
provides such wisdom to the poet so that he can set it into sweet poetry by using kennings,
heiti, and verse forms. However he obtains the wisdom, the poet then extracts the core
essence of the wisdom and blends it with sweetness to craft a piece of poetry. In this model
for creating poetry, the poet is not emulating Óðinn at all, but rather the dwarves.

The model of the second mead myth, however, does suggest emulating Óðinn. As
described earlier, Hallbjǫrn does emulate Óðinn through his seeking of poetry on a grave
mound and then going on to compose and perform the poems he gains. His persistent efforts
followed by sudden access to the other world can be likened to modern notions of receiving a
sudden flash of inspiration after spending a long time trying to solve a problem and getting nowhere. The ancient model, however, suggests that some form of journey outside the conventional world was considered helpful to the process. The examples of Hallbjörn and Cædmon suggest that a stanza or two of fully formed verse was not thought an unrealistic amount to have suddenly pour forth from a flash of insight. Hallbjörn’s is not the only example of such sudden insight. Hávamál provides another in Óðinn’s winning of the runes through his Yggdrasill ordeal. In it, Óðinn goes outside the conventional world by literally hanging off the structure in which the conventional world is situated, persists in his effort for nine nights, and suddenly gains a flash of insight in the form of the runes, which he returns with. In this model for creating poetry, the poet might emulate Óðinn by engaging in a ritual for accessing sudden inspiration from the other world. However, one may wryly note that the detail of Suttungr’s chase suggests that the would-be poet could possibly return from the other world with eagle’s mud instead of precious mead. There are no examples of poets deliberately engaging in such rituals — Hallbjörn did it accidentally — but the well-known Íslingingabók tells of the lawspeaker Þorgeirr, who went under his cloak for an entire day without speaking before deciding on the Christianization of Iceland, and this may suggest a similar sort of ritual. Faulkes’ view of Óðinn’s winning of the Poetic Mead as the obtaining of order (in the form of a poem) from disorder (represented by the jötunn) is similar in some ways, but he treats it as just a metaphor, not as a possible description of an actual process.

The two formulas may now be summarized as follows: the first is craftsmanship in an analytical process, the second is journeying to the other world in a mantic or synthetic process. The first is the purview of dwarves, the second is the purview of Óðinn.

Finally, some remarks on the names of the three vessels that contain the Poetic Mead are needed, since Snorri takes the trouble to mention them and their kennings several times.

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132 Stanzas 138–45 as found in, for example, Eddukvædi, 1:350–52. The verse does not explicitly say that the tree that Óðinn hangs on is Yggdrasill, but this is the most common interpretation. See, for instance, the notes on the verse in that edition.

133 The runes of the verse may refer to either the rune-staves, with which one writes words, or mysteries in the sense of hidden, arcane knowledge. Either way, Óðinn has clearly returned from the ordeal with something of great value.


135 Faulkes, “Viking Poetry,” 20. There is a similar view in Stephens, “Mead of Poetry,” 266.

136 See also Frank’s discussion of the meaning of these three names, in which she argues that Snorri has made them containers where they had not been so before. Frank, “Snorri and the Mead of Poetry,” 161–63.
Given their position in the myth, they may be seen as things that contain poetry. So what three things contain poetry? Óðrœrir is usually taken as a compound of óðr and hrœrir, and thus ‘exciter of poetry, frenzy, or mind.’ The skald would have readily connected it to Óðinn on the basis of the first root. So any sort of ‘exciter of mind,’ such as alcoholic drink, might be thought to contain poetry within itself. Since alcoholic drink is often equated with poetry instead, one may see here the result or the cause of the confusion as to whether ultimately Óðrœrir is the name of the mead or the vessel. Bodn is simply a word meaning ‘container, vessel.’ It may be interpreted metaphorically as the poet himself, the poem itself, or the meter used in a poem, any of which may be said to ‘contain’ poetry. None of these reveal much, however. The possible meanings of Són are less certain, but potentially more revealing. They may include ‘blood’ or ‘reconciliation.’ As ‘blood,’ it recalls the wisdom of Kvasir. It may also suggest that poetry, like blood, is a resource which is inside of everyone, but for which the skilled poet has a greater capacity to access than most people. As in the case of Kvasir’s blood, it could represent the core essence of the poet. Also, it may remind one of the capacity for the gift to run in families, ‘in the blood’ as it were, as will be seen later. As ‘reconciliation,’ it does not contain poetry directly, but it would recall the truce of the Æsir and Vanir that is required to create Kvasir or the dwarves’ surrendering of the mead to Suttungr. The latter — obtaining freedom via ‘poetry’ — may in turn remind one of the trope of the skald redeeming his life via a praise poem, as will be seen in Egils saga.

So, in addition to ample material for kennings in the Mead Myth, there is also a mythology to participate in. It is one that gives the skald a perspective on the nature of his craft and the poetry it produces. Thanks to the euhemerization carried out in Edda and Ynglinga saga, there are no serious obstacles for the budding skald to think, whether consciously or not, that something like the Mead Myth did happen among his ancient ancestors and that he is taking part in their legacy.
Chapter 3: *Heimskringla*

The poets were often in the king’s presence, for they were bold of speech. They often sat during the daytime in front of the king’s high seat.

— On the King of the Sviar in *Óláfs saga ins helga* 137

3.1 Opening Remarks

The general progression here will be to go in order through the text, while at the same time focusing on the role that each court skald plays. However, some deviations in the order will be made, so that material on certain themes and skalds is more contiguous.

3.2 The *Heimskringla* Prologue

The prologue serves as a positioning statement for the rest of the text, and it is also where Snorri can and does write outside of the typical saga style and reveal his authorial view. He wastes no time emphasizing the importance of skalds. Indeed, the very first mentions of names in the prologue are of skalds and the kings and jarls they composed for, such as Þjóðólfr ór Hvini composing for Haraldr hárfagri. Snorri says: “Eptir Þjóðólfrs sögn er fyrst ritin ævi Ynglinga ok þar við aukit eptir sögn fróðra manna” (“The history of the Ynglingar is written first according to Þjóðólfr’s account, and augmented according to the account of learned men”).138 Here, in proper history, the skald’s words have primacy, and learned men come second, and this would be one of the first things the target audience would read. This sets the tone for the skald as the supreme eyewitness for the deeds of kings, which will later find its climax in *Óláfs saga ins helga*.

More famed, of course, is the following passage:

Með Haraldi konungi váru skáld, ok kunna menn enn kvæði þeira ok allra konunga kvæði, þeira er síðan hafa verit í Nóregi, ok tókum vér þar mest dæmi af, þat er sagt er í þeim kvæðum, er kvæðin váru fyrir sjálfum hófðingjunum eða sonum þeira. Tókum vér þat allt fyrir satt, er í þeim kvæðum finnsk um ferðir þeira eða orrostur. En þat er hátttr skálda at lofa þann mest, er þá eru þeir fyrir, en

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There were skalds (poets) with King Haraldr, and people still know their poems and poems about all the kings there have been in Norway since, and we have mostly used as evidence what is said in those poems that were recited before the rulers themselves or their sons. We regard as true everything that is found in those poems about their expeditions and battles. It is indeed the habit of poets to praise most highly the one in whose presence they are at the time, but no one would dare to tell him to his face about deeds of his which all who listened, as well as the man himself, knew were falsehoods and fictions. That would be mockery and not praise.  

More than merely being a statement of the veracity of the evidence for what he is writing, it emphasizes that skaldic poems have survived all that time, that the skald creates something truly lasting. As a contrast to Snorri’s choice of emphasis on skaldic poetry, one need only consider Ari inn fróði and his Íslendingabók — though he too makes a careful recounting of his sources, he does not mention skaldic poetry as one of them. He does quote a single piece of verse to detail the reason for Hjalti Skeggjason’s blasphemy conviction, but this could easily be happenstance. Whatever the quality of his other sources, it seems clear that Snorri deliberately chose to put skaldic poetry front and center, and his profuse verse quotations bear that out.

3.3 Skalds as Eyewitnesses and Icelanders

I now note some examples underscoring the skald as an eyewitness, which are not part of the skald narratives later in this chapter. These show that Snorri wanted to reinforce that idea in ways beyond the mere citing of verses. The last example here also shows Snorri’s advocacy for Icelandic skalds.

In Óláfs saga ins helga, Snorri quotes verses from a drápa that þórarin loftunga made about Knútr, which detail an expedition of Knútr’s in Denmark. Two lines in particular read: “Vórum sjón sögu sliks ríkari” (“Such a sight to me was more splendid than telling”).

140 Íslendingabók Landnámabók, 1:15.
After he has finished quoting from Tøgdrápa, Snorri does not miss the opportunity here to call attention to the value of the skald as an eyewitness when he refers back to these lines, saying:

Hér getr þess, at þeim var sjón sögu ríkri um ferð Knúts konungs, er þetta kvað, því at Þórarinn hrósar því, at hann var þá í fór með Knúti konungi, er hann kom í Nóreg.

Here it says that sight was better than story as regards King Knútr's expedition for him who composed this, for Þórarinn boasts of having been in company with King Knútr when he came to Norway.  

Snorri seems to have a particular concern for Haraldr Sigurðarson. Turning to Haraldr saga Sigurðarsonar, there is a remarkable story telling how Haraldr himself blinded the Greek emperor when in Constantinople. The reliability of the skaldic testimony cited for it is directly commented on by Snorri in the text:

Í þessum tveim drápum Haralds ok mör gumðum kvæðum hans er getit þess, at Haraldr blindaði sjálfan Grikkjakonung. Nefna mætti þeir til þess hertoga eða greifa eða annars konar tígnarmenn, ef þeir vissi, at þat væri sannara, því at sjálfr Haraldr flutti þessa sögn ok þeir menn aðrir, er þar váru með honum.

In these two drápas about Haraldr and many other poems about him it is mentioned that Haraldr blinded the actual king of the Greeks. They could have named for this role commanders or counts or any other men of high rank if they were certain that that would be more accurate, for it was Haraldr himself that transmitted this story, together with the other men that were there with him.

Later in the narrative, Snorri intrudes to praise Haraldr Sigurðarson:

Haraldr konungr var maðr ríkr ok stjórnsmar innan lands, speingr mikill at viti,
svá at þat er alþýðu mál, at engi höfðingi hafi sá verit á Norðrlöndum, er jafndjúpvitr hafi verit sem Haraldr eða ráðsnjallr.

King Haraldr was a powerful man and a firm ruler within his own country, very intelligent in his thinking, so that it is universally held that there has been no ruler


in Northern Lands that has been as profoundly wise as Haraldr or as clever in his decisions.\textsuperscript{144}

His praise of Haraldr is far from happenstance, as it has been suggested that Snorri has deliberately toned down his portrayal of Haraldr vis-à-vis  
Morkinskinna, omitting much opprobrium against him and accounts of his injustices to Icelanders to produce a much more favorable image, suggesting concern for a Norwegian audience.\textsuperscript{145} I suggest it also serves to depict Haraldr as a model king worthy of emulation, so that Snorri’s courtly audience will be appropriately prepared to receive his words about the advantages of having skalds, which soon follow:

\begin{quote}
Er saga mikil frá Haraldi konungi sett í kvæði, þau er íslenskir menn færðu honum sjálfum eða sonum hans. Var hann fyrir þá sok vinr þeira mikill. Hann var ok inn mesti vinr hegat til allra landsmanna.

There is much material about King Haraldr recorded in poems that Icelandic men presented to him or to his sons. He was for that reason a great friend to them. He was also a very great friend to all the people here in this country.\textsuperscript{146}
\end{quote}

By being a friend to Icelanders and skalds, the king ensures that his praise and stories of his deeds will live on. In line with Snorri’s own interests, the ideal skald is implied to be an Icelander, for Snorri does not call attention to the fact that a particular poet was Norwegian, but frequently points out skalds as being Icelanders, as will be seen. In the discussion of the roles that the skalds take in the  
Heimskringla narratives, other examples of how they are positioned as eyewitness will be noted. Beyond those, further minor examples of skalds as eyewitnesses and the virtues of being friends with Icelanders were found, but it would not add anything to discuss them.

\section*{3.4 Remarks on the Use of Verse in  
Heimskringla}

As has been noted,  
Heimskringla abounds with verse citations to support the details of the narrative that Snorri provides. As a whole, they function as an ever-present reminder of the skald’s role in ensuring that the glory of his patron will live on after him, and that written texts such as sagas based on them will have a sound basis in a venerable tradition. Their use

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Snorri,  
Heimskringla, ed. Bjarni, 3:118; Snorri,  
Heimskringla, trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 3:70.
\item Theodore M. Andersson, “The Politics of Snorri Sturluson,”  
\item Snorri,  
Heimskringla, ed. Bjarni, 3:119; Snorri,  
Heimskringla, trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 3:70.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
may well be one of the main ways that Snorri intended to promote the need for skalds in
*Heimskringla*. As an example, one may take the first verse cited in *Heimskringla*:

Svá kvað Bragi inn gamli: So said Bragi inn gamli (the Old):

Gefjón dró frá Gylfa Gefjún dragged from Gylfí,
glöð dúþróðul qóðla, gladly, a sea-ring homeland,
svát af rennirauknum Danmǫrk’s addition, so that
rauk, Danmarkar auka. the draught-beasts were steaming.
Bóru öxn ok áttu With eight orbs of the forehead
ennitunlg, þars gingu the oxen, in front of
fýr vineyar víðri the plundered isle, wide-pastured,
valrauf, fjögru haufuð. paced; and four heads also.147

Snorri cites it right after telling the tale of how King Gylfi offered Gefjun the amount of land
that a team of oxen could plough in a single day. Gefjun then digs up and carries off far more
than Gylfi expected by means of magically-enhanced oxen: a huge piece, which becomes
Denmark’s Sjælland, leaving behind Lake Mälaren in Sweden.

Leading off with such a verse reminds the reader that the skaldic tradition goes back a
long way, and that the earliest known skald was preserving valuable details that survived to
Snorri’s day. Though it refers to mythical history in the distant past, Snorri treats recent
history no differently, supporting the details of battles and other adventures of kings and jarls
with verses. Such material is typically introduced with words such as *svá kvað* (‘so said’) or
similar. It would serve no further purpose to multiply the examples of this here. It should be
noted that most of the time, such citations make no direct implications about the presence of
the skald cited: he could have easily composed from having heard a report from someone else.
However, as was seen above and will be seen again, the words that introduce or follow a verse
occasionally imply or outright claim that the skald has directly witnessed or participated in the
events, or something else noteworthy.

As for the original use of the skaldic verses that Snorri quotes, Faulkes’ view is likely
one that Snorri would have agreed with:

They were part of the ritual of the royal court, encouraged by the king since they
supported his role and legitimised his claim to kingship; they reflected and

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affirmed the values and ideology of the warrior class to which they were addressed, praising the king above all for the traditional viking virtues of generosity and valour.\textsuperscript{148}

The church, however, was gaining in importance for northern kingship. Bagge notes: “There are reasons to believe in a significant change in the position of the king and the central government during Hákon’s reign: the doctrine of the king as God’s representative on earth and the ideal of the rex iustus were further developed and gained wider acceptance in the leading circles of the country.”\textsuperscript{149} Wanner applies Bagge’s conclusion mainly for showing why Hákon Hákonarson would not have been interested in Snorri’s attempt to get him to value a Trojan ancestral origin for northern kingship — it offered him nothing he needed as king.\textsuperscript{150} This same dynamic would also erode the utility of skaldic verse for the purposes Faulkes mentioned. Thus, one might also see an urgent attempt to reverse this trend in Snorri’s copious verse quotations.

3.5 Ynglinga saga, Óðinn, and Mythical History

Although there is nothing in Ynglinga saga about court skalds working for kings, and skalds have no part in the action here, it fulfills an essential function nonetheless. It compliments the euhemerizing found in Edda, and it may provide a mythological basis for some poetic practices, as well as the association of the skald with magic.

Through the euhemerizing, largely in its early chapters, Ynglinga saga enables Christian kings to be comfortable with praise poetry that references heathen gods, who are now looked upon as royal ancestors and thus no less deserving of praise and remembrance than themselves. At the same time, skalds may look upon these figures as distinguished ancestors and the originators of their craft. Skaldic verse is cited for the veracity of the narrative, just like the rest of Heimskringla, and thus these tales of early kings are fitted in on equal footing with those of later kings. Kvasir, a being of great importance to the Mead Myth, is here just one of the Vanir.\textsuperscript{151} There is no suggestion of him being made from spittle, which is well in accord with the general tendency in Heimskringla to minimize the supernatural,

\textsuperscript{149} Sverre Bagge, From Gang Leader to the Lord’s Anointed (Odense: Odense University Press, 1996), 159–60.
\textsuperscript{150} Wanner, Snorri Sturluson and the Edda, 152–53.
particularly the miraculous. However, Snorri still mentions supernatural or magical occurrences, especially when there is skaldic verse to corroborate it, such as Sveigðir following a dwarf into a rock, as attested by a verse from Þjóðólfr ór Hvini.152

The first item of specific importance to the skaldic mythology occurs when it is said about Óðinn that:

Mælti hann allt hendingum, svá sem nú er þat kveðit, er skáldskapr heitir. Hann ok hofgoðar hans heita ljóðasmiðir, því at sú iðrött hófsk af þeim í Norðrþöndum.

Everything he said was in rhyme, like the way what is now called poetry is composed. He and his temple priests were called craftsmen of poems, for that art originated with them in the Northern lands.153

Though this leaves out the colorful Mead Myth from Edda, it nevertheless serves as a euhemeristic reinforcement of Snorri’s tale, bolstering Óðinn’s role as a distinguished ancestor and originator of poetry, in a form compatible with the overall nature of Heimskringla. Both sentences may be seen as authorizing texts for poetic practices. The first may remind one of the saga practice of situational verse (as is seen repeatedly in Egils saga, for instance), where someone speaks to a poet in ordinary prose, and the poet responds in a verse. Since humans are not gods (euhemerized or not), it would be a natural extension of this that gifted humans would speak conversationally in verse only some (or perhaps much) of the time instead of all of it. I do not suggest that Snorri invented the Icelandic prosimetrum. It was an approach that was already flourishing amongst the oldest Icelandic family sagas of 1200–1230.154 Indeed, I would see the Rök stone (Óg 136) as a runic prosimetrum from the 9th century, which suggests deep roots for the practice.155 Such widespread use of the motif might well suggest that real poets indeed spoke conversational verse on occasion. More pointedly, I do suggest that this Ynglinga saga passage may be seen as grounding the prosimetrum practice in the distinguished ancestors of the Norse. The second sentence, which spreads the credit to Óðinn’s fellow priests, implies the use of poetry in religious practices and

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by religious specialists — a consideration which may be a nod to Christian poetry and a
suggestion that clerics get in on the skaldic revival. Guðrún Nordal notes that: “The
successful introduction of the oral, pagan heritage in Latin Christian culture in Iceland
through the intermediary characteristics of skaldic verse is — I believe — at the root of the
flourishing literary production of the thirteenth century.”156 Snorri may be seen as
contributing to that process here in a way that also speaks to the figure of the skald. However,
to briefly speak against my aims here, it may be noted that no mythological authorizing text
for the figure of a skald as a praiser of kings and an essential part of their retinues is given
here — though it may be that there was no need for such a text, given the overwhelming
number of verse citations throughout Heimskringla and their implications.

Óðinn’s appearance and demeanor may also serve as an exemplary model for either
chieftains or poets, since he was both in Ynglinga saga, but here I only consider such
depiction with respect to skalds. The most relevant description is given just before the claim
that he spoke only in rhymes:

Hann var svá fagr ok göfugligr álítum, þá er hann sat með sínnum vinum, at öllum
hló hugr við. En þá er hann var í her, þá sýndisk hann grimligr sínum óvinum. En
þat bar til þess, at hann kunni þær ípróttir, at hann skipti litum ok líkum á hverja
lund, er hann vildi. Önnur var sú, at hann talaði svá snjallt ok slétt, at öllum, er á
heyrðu, þótti þat eina satt.

He was so fair and noble in countenance, when he was sitting among his friends,
that it rejoiced the hearts of all. But when he went to battle he appeared ferocious
to his enemies. And the reason was that he had the faculty of changing
complexion and form in whatever manner he chose. Another was that he spoke so
eloquently and smoothly that everyone who heard thought that only what he said
was true.157

There are some depictions of ‘skaldic presence’ in the texts that this may be compared to. Of
Óttarr svarti it is said: “Óttarr var máldjarfr maðr ok höfðingjakærr” (“Óttarr was a man bold
of speech and popular with people of high rank”).158 About Steinn, the troublesome Icelander,

156 Guðrún Nordal, “Skaldic Versifying and Social Discrimination in Medieval Iceland,” The Dorothea
Coke Memorial Lecture in Northern Studies, University College London, March 15, 2001 (London:
Viking Society for Northern Research, 2003), 8.
it is said: “Steinn Skaptason var manna fríðastr ok bezt at sér görr um ípróttir, skáld gott ok skartsmaðr mikill ok metnaðarfúllr” (“Steinn Skaptason was the most handsome of men and most accomplished in skills, a good poet and a very ostentatious man in dress and full of ambition”). Near the end of a battle, it is said of Bersi Skáld-Torfuson that: “Hann var auðkenndr, hverjum manni vænni ok búinn forknunnar vel at vápnum ok at klæðum” (“He was easily recognised, the handsomest of men and fitted out exceedingly well with weapons and clothes”). His metronymic indicates that the skaldic talent runs in his family. Except for skartsmaðr (‘ostentatious man’), all of these are admirable traits in a skald. These depictions, like the speaking in verse, may easily be seen as appropriately toned down in the transition from god to human. None of the skalds in Heimskringla are depicted as grímligr (‘ferocious’) or with any ability to change their complexion. However, that will be seen in Egils saga in the depictions of Egill himself. Other depictions of skaldic presence will be noted in the sections pertaining to the various skalds.

That the originator of poetry is said to have had magical powers is also a consideration for his function as a role model. Interestingly, this occurs in spite of Snorri not citing skaldic verse for it, though this may be because the stories or eddic verses that are the basis for this were well-known. In the middle of a description of many of Óðinn’s powers, it is said that:

Allar þessar íþróttir kenndi hann með rúnum ok ljóðum þeim, er galdrar heita.
Fyrir því eru Æsir kallaðir galdrasmiðir.
All these skills he taught along with runes and those songs that are called galdrar (‘magic spells’). Because of this the Æsir are called galdrasmiðir (‘magic makers’).

The originator of poetry is thus also a master of runes and magic. That the magic can be intimately associated with poetry, perhaps even as function of it, is shown by how Óðinn defeats the mound dwellers who guard hidden treasure: “batt hann með orðum einum þá, er

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161 Snorri, Heimskringla, trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:40n98.
162 For a fuller discussion of the physical depictions of skalds that includes many works beyond the three I am focusing on here, see Alison Finlay, “Pouring Óðinn’s Mead: An Antiquarian Theme?” in Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society: Proceedings of the 11th International Saga Conference 2–7 July 2000, University of Sydney, ed. Geraldine Barnes and Margaret Clunies Ross (Sydney: Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Sydney, 2000), 94–99.
fyrrí bjoggu” (“with words alone he would bind those who were in them”).\textsuperscript{164} Those words must be poetry, as it has already been established that he speaks only in it. So too, it is likely that the galdrar are also poetry. A brief situational verse is spoken by the sorcerer Vitgeirr later in Haralds saga ins hárfgra,\textsuperscript{165} which may be another nod to the connection between poetry in general and the practice of magic. Of course, another human parallel to Óðinn and his magic will be seen in Egils saga in the figure of Egill.

3.6 Óðinn and Odinic Figures after Ynglinga saga

However, one clear parallel to Óðinn as a combination of chieftain and poet, is seen in Haralds saga ins hárfgra. This is Torf-Einarr jarl, for he is described as “ljótr maðr ok einsýnn ok þó manna skyggnstr” (“an ugly person and one-eyed, and yet the most sharp-sighted of men”).\textsuperscript{166} A parallel to that ugliness will be seen in Egill, but otherwise, the description could just as easily apply to Óðinn. He kills one of his enemies, Hálfdan háleggur, a son of the king, via blood eagle, and speaks a rather large amount of seemingly situational verse, unusual for kings and jarls in the text.\textsuperscript{167} He comes off as a rather clever schemer during his time in the narrative, and manages to hold his own against Haraldr hárfgari, getting a sixty mark fine for the trouble he caused, when his actions should have merited death. Of course, beyond Einarr, other kings and chieftains in Heimskringla do occasionally speak in verse. Most notable of these is Haraldr Sigurðarson in his saga, but there is no obvious feature in his depiction to identify him with Óðinn like there is with Einarr. Other kings and chieftains speaking in verse is infrequent, however, and seems no more than happenstance.

There is a quite neutral depiction of non-Christian rites when Óðinn is mentioned in Hákonar saga göða, especially when compared to later anti-heathen scenes in Óláfs saga ins helga, when Óðinn is not mentioned.\textsuperscript{168} It is at a feast held by Sigurðr Hlaðaþararl, in which it is noted about the ritual toasting that: “skyldi fyrst Óðins full — skyldi þat drekka til sigrs ok ríkis konungi sinum” (“first would be Óðinn’s toast—that was drunk to victory and to the

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\textsuperscript{164}Snorri, Heimskringla, ed. Bjarni, 1:19; Snorri, Heimskringla, trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 1:11.
\textsuperscript{166}Snorri, Heimskringla, ed. Bjarni, 1:129; Snorri, Heimskringla, trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 1:75.
\textsuperscript{168}For an example of one of these anti-heathen scenes, see Snorri, Heimskringla, ed. Bjarni, 2:101; Snorri, Heimskringla, trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:64.
\end{flushright}
power of the king”).

Óðinn is in no way condemned or connected with the devil here. The 13th-century skaldic and courtly audience, in seeing that the specific honor given to Óðinn here was not offensive — indeed, the same rite has people drinking to the memory of their kinsmen — may perhaps consider that it is no bad thing to honor him as a distinguished ancestor. In accounting for the difference between these and the later anti-heathen scenes, it may be noted that in those later scenes, there is no mention of Óðinn whatsoever, the god that was most important to Snorri’s aims.

Finally, Óðinn’s sole actual appearance in Heimskringla in the post-mythological age has him in the role of a knowledgeable wise man filled with historical lore about old kings and other events when he visits Óláfr Tryggvason, although no poetry or skalds are involved. Óðinn is portrayed in a favorable light here by entertaining the king with fascinating conversation, and when he departs, he is generous to the king and his host by gifting them two choice cuts of meat after he has noticed a lack of quality in what the cooks were preparing. Óláfr is wary of being deceived by him once he figures out that it was Óðinn, but still Óðinn is not called a devil or condemned. This is a contrast to Oddr Snorrason’s version of this incident, in which ‘Óðinn’ clearly has evil intentions and is reckoned as merely a disguise for the Christian devil.

From the portrayal of Torf-Einarr and these two incidents, the figure of Óðinn is seen as that of an ancestor, yet one whose spirit lives on to influence the world in a positive way — whether in a resemblance to the living, in a memorial, or as an apparition. This further supports his euhemerized role as a distinguished ancestor that the skalds might properly honor as the originator of their craft.

3.7 The Power of Poetic Speech

Before discussing the court skalds who have a role in the action of Heimskringla, it is helpful to mention two incidents which establish the special power of skaldic verse to influence kings. Neither poet seems to be a court skald, so their use of verse speaks to the power of poetry itself, instead of to the power of the office of court skald.

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171 Oddr Snorrason, Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar, in Færeyinga saga, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, Íslenzk fornrit 25 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornítankæti: 2006), 249–52. See also the discussion comparing several versions of this tale in Kaplan, Thou Fearful Guest, 155–92.
In Haralds saga ins hárfagra, Haraldr hárfagri has outlawed Gǫngu-Hrölf, the son of Hildr, daughter of Hrölf neфа, and she begs the king to reconsider, but he refuses. She then resorts to an entreaty in skaldic verse to try to point out that it will be worse for him to make her son an outlaw rather than to keep him within society. The implication is that skaldic discourse is a higher form of speech for appealing to and persuading a king. Haraldr’s reaction to this verbal escalation is not stated. If the outlawry stood, there is certainly no indication that Gǫngu-Hrölf caused him any further trouble, for the text immediately following the verse says that Gǫngu-Hrölf went abroad, got his fortune in Normandy, and seems to have stayed there. However, in stepping forward in a skaldic capacity to advise the king, Hildr foreshadows a court skald who follows just a few pages later: Þjóðólfr ór Hvini.

Before turning to him, however, it is worth a break in the order of the narrative to mention a scene from much later in Magnúss saga ins góða. There, poetry also serves as a higher form of discourse for persuading kings when used by a relatively minor character who does not seem to be a court skald. This is Þorgeirr af Súlu. It is a day when people are bringing various cases before Magnús konungr. Þorgeirr is trying to get a hearing, and the king is not responding to him, perhaps because Þorgeirr is trying to get ahead of those who are physically closer to the king. He resorts to a hátt (‘loudly’) proclaimed skaldic verse to obtain his hearing. The gathered people do not appreciate his outburst, but Þorgeirr gets his hearing as a result, showing the effectiveness of verse this time. Though it is not said just what his business was, it is reported that: “Konungr kallaði hann til sín ok lauk síðan örendum hans, svá at Þorgeiri lîkaði vel, ok hét honum vinátu sinni” (“The king called him over to himself and afterwards settled his business in such a way that Þorgeirr was well pleased, and he promised him his friendship”). Court skalds, prospective and actual, will also be seen switching to verse as a higher form of appeal.

Why should the resort to verse prove effective? One may see in this a reflection of the description of Óðinn, from above, that: “Hann talaði svá snjallt ok slétt, at ûllum, er á heyðrðu, þótt þat eina satt” (“He spoke so eloquently and smoothly that everyone who heard thought

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that only what he said was true”).\textsuperscript{175} That speech, like the rest of Óðinn’s speech, would be in verse. The human transposition of this would be that skaldic verse would make the speaker more likely to be believed as speaking the truth. Of course, this is entirely in line with Snorri’s arguments in the prologue that skaldic verse should be accorded a higher truth value than other accounts of history.

### 3.8 Bjóólfr or Hvini: Good Advice and Interceding with a King

I now turn to Bjóólfr to lead off my narrative analysis of the significant skalds in the text. His verse has been cited in support of many legendary incidents, and he becomes the first historical court skald to enter the action in\textit{ Haralds saga ins hárfagra}.\textsuperscript{176} Haraldr hárfagri has just discovered the enchantments on his deceased wife Snæfríðr’s corpse, which appeared fair for three years until moved, when it suddenly revealed its stench, rot, and animal infestation. Haraldr overreacts, and disowns the sons he had with the woman. To obtain redress, one of them enlists the help of Bjóólfr, his foster-father, who is said to be a beloved friend of the king. He goes to one of the king’s banquets, and when the king questions, in verse, why there are more warriors than expected in the room, Bjóólfr replies himself with a verse and greets the king, then asks for, and obtains, redress for the sons, that Haraldr duly recognize them again. The result is that the sons become excellent men of good standing, and the next sentence reports that peace and prosperity were in the country. It is not directly stated that this good fortune came from restoring recognition to his sons, but the positioning is certainly convenient. Here, a skald serves as an effective intercessor for obtaining redress from a king.\textsuperscript{177} To be imaginative, one might parallel this with the deceased saint, who is called upon by the worshipper to intercede with God on his behalf. To take a cultural capital view, this would suggest to the king reading it that skalds are good to have as wise counselors who can steer them away from serious mistakes into a right course of action and a desirable outcome. A little bit later, Bjóólfr provides an inverse point to his correction of Haraldr.

Guðrød ljómi, the one who enlisted his help earlier, is preparing to sail and intends to go,

\textsuperscript{177} Interestingly, there is a strong parallel to this when another of Haraldr’s skalds, Ólfr hnúfa, who is a kinsman of Kveld-Úlfr and Skalla-Grímr, intercedes with Haraldr on behalf of their family in\textit{ Egils saga}, although the intercessions ultimately do not turn out as well. I discuss those incidents later.
even though a storm is setting in.\textsuperscript{178} Þjóðólfur speaks in verse to advise against it, but Guðrøðr goes anyway. The price of dismissing a skald’s advice is quite high here. The boat capsizes and everyone onboard dies, at the spot that Þjóðólfur warned would have heavy surf in his verse.\textsuperscript{179}

3.9 Guthormr sindri: Peacemaking

Later in *Haralds saga ins hárfragra*, a brief episode with Guthormr sindri shows the skald in the role of clever peacemaker. He is said to be a close friend of both Haraldr hárfragri and Hálfdan svarti, who are now quarreling and ready to lead troops against each other. He takes it upon himself to bring them to peace in a most creative manner:

\begin{quote}
Hann hafði ort sitt kvæði um hvárn þeira feðga. Þeir húfðu bøðit honum laun, en hann neitti ok beiddisk, at þeir skyldi veita honum eina bœn, ok húfðu þeir því heitit. Hann för þá á fund Haralds konungs ok bar sættarorð millum þeira ok bað þá hvárn tveggja þeira bœnar ok þess, at þeir skyldi sættask, en konungar gerðu svá mikinn metnað hans, at af hans bœn sættusk þeir.
\end{quote}

He had composed poems about each of the two, father and son. They had offered him a reward, but he refused, and asked that they should grant him one request, and they had promised this. He then went to see King Haraldr and mediated for reconciliation between them and asked each of them to fulfil their promise and that they should be reconciled, and the kings held him in such great esteem that at his request they were reconciled.\textsuperscript{180}

So, by a clever scheme, using the trope of a promise-to-be-redeemed-later, he deliberately made praise poetry with the intent that peace between father and son should be the reward for it, averting what could have ended in a kin-slaying, one of the most horrifying crimes in that culture. He has the support of other nobles in the reconciliation, of course, but the esteem that he has from the kings is likely inseparable from his poetry. Like Þjóðólfur above, he heals a breach of right order at the highest level of the society, and he has — almost literally —

\begin{footnotes}
\item[179] Fidjestøl more briefly discusses these Þjóðólfur incidents, the following incident of Guthormr, and the role of skald as peacemaker/diplomat, but not as intercessor. Bjarne Fidjestøl, “The King’s Skald from Kvinesdal and his Poetry,” in *Selected Papers*, by Bjarne Fidjestøl, ed. Odd Einar Haugen and Else Mundal, trans. Peter Foote (Odense: Odense University Press, 1997), 73–74.
\end{footnotes}
bound them with words alone, the power attributed to Óðinn back in *Ynglinga saga*. He has also done this unselfishly, as he has forgone the usual personal material reward for such poetry in obtaining a benefit for his community.

### 3.10 Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finnsson: A Major Skald

The next skald to enter the action is Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finnsson in *Hákonar saga góða*. Hákon is eating his morning meal, and it is known that he is not to be disturbed with news of war. Yet the watchmen see a war fleet approaching, and know they must do something. So one of them summons Eyvindr outside to be their intercessor. Eyvindr sees the ships, and goes back inside at once. Perhaps mindful of the king’s prohibition, he first gets the king’s attention with a cryptic statement: “Litil er líðandis stund, en löng matmáls stund” (“It takes a little time to sail, but a long time to eat a meal”).\(^1\) With Hákon’s curiosity appropriately prepared, Eyvindr then informs him of the threat in a verse. Once again, the skald’s unique art and position are the critical means by which necessary, but hard to deliver, news may be brought to a king, so that the king may do the right thing. That the king holds Eyvindr in high regard is made quite plain to the reader by his reply to the news: “Ertu svá góðr drengr, Eyvindr, at þú mant eigi hersǫgu segja, nema sǫnn sǫ” (“You are such an honest fellow, Eyvindr, that you will not tell us news of war unless it is true”).\(^2\)

The incident does not end there, as Eyvindr also plays a critical role in the response to the threat. Hákon notes that the odds are steep, but that they have been outnumbered before and prevailed. When the gathered people make no reply to this, Eyvindr speaks up with a verse advocating courage. The king replies, again praising his skald: “Hraustliga er þetta mælt ok nær skaplyndi mínu” (“Boldly is that spoken, and close to my disposition”).\(^3\) Thus, with the assistance of his skald, the king’s men are suitably persuaded and inspired to follow this with their own courageous words, and so they prepare for battle. This time, the skald has taken the role of king’s advocate, to get his men to fall in line when their courage threatened to waver.

The reader is told that Eyvindr was present in the battle that follows, when it is noted that Hákon’s helmet makes him rather too visible in the battle.\(^4\) Eyvindr, who is protective

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of his lord and aware that they are sorely outnumbered here, puts a hood over the king’s helmet to help reduce the number of weapons aimed at him. So it is that Eyvindr’s presence and action in the narrative serve to portray the quoted verses as not merely well-informed, but as actual eyewitness testimony in this case.

Eyvindr’s final skaldic duty to Hákon is found in the conclusion to Hákonar saga góða. When Hákon dies of his wounds from that battle, his people give him heathen rites:

Mæltu þeir svá fyrir grepti hans sem heiðinna manna siðr var til, visuðu honum til Valhallar. Eyvindr skáldaspillir orti kvæði eitt um fall Hákonar konungs ok svá þat, hversu honum var fagnat.

They spoke over his burial as the custom of heathen people was, directed him to Valhóll. Eyvindr skáldaspillir composed a poem about the fall of King Hákon, telling also about his reception there.185

That poem, Hákonarmál, is then quoted to end the saga, seemingly in full. At a minimum, this reminds the reader of the skald’s role in commemorating his deceased patron. Beyond that, the poem may be part of directing the deceased to Valhóll. If the heathens portrayed here shared the text’s view of skaldic poetry as a higher form of discourse for appealing to a king, they certainly would have used skaldic poetry for appealing to the gods over the matter of their beloved king’s afterlife destination — which was clearly in doubt, given Hákon’s lack of full commitment to either Christianity or the old faith. So Eyvindr here may be binding with poetic words, just like Óðinn. Regardless of what the heathens portrayed actually did, the Christian readers of this text could easily adapt the example to commemorative poetry that speaks of the deceased in heaven, although one supposes that doctrinally it could not save someone from hell.

Other reminders of the skald’s final and posthumous duty to his lord occur when a particular verse citation is pointed out as an erfídrápa (‘memorial poem’), such as occurs in Óláfs saga ins helga: “Svá segir Sigvatr skáld í erfídrápu þeiri, er hann orti um Óláf konung” (“The poet Sigvatr says this in the memorial poem that he composed about King Óláf”).186 That drápa of Sigvatr’s is frequently quoted in support of many details thereafter, although it is only called an erfídrápa that first time. A second reference to an erfídrápa by a

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different poet also occurs in that same saga. Reminding the reader of the adaptability of skaldic verse to Christian contexts, it is used for commemorating the incorrupt body of a saint. Verses attributed to Sigvatr which recount Óláfr’s miracles are cited also. The legitimacy of hagiography via skaldic verse would certainly help Snorri’s case for its revival.

Eyvindr’s role in the narrative continues in Haralds saga gráfeldar, and it starts with some skaldic rivalry. Glúmr Geirason composes a popular verse celebrating Haraldr gráfeldr’s defeat of Hákon. Then Eyvindr composes a verse in response in defense of Hákon’s honor, which also becomes popular. Haraldr takes great offense at the verse, however. Haraldr and Eyvindr are reconciled on the condition that Eyvindr will become one of his skalds, and a verse that he made for Hákon is cited. Yet the tension between the two continues, for Eyvindr composes a verse critical of the stinginess of Gunnhildr’s sons who are ruling Norway now, of whom Haraldr gráfeldr is foremost. Stinginess is a serious fault in a king, and Haraldr becomes angry, and declares him an enemy for his disloyalty. Eyvindr proclaims his loyalty in a verse, but although it did not gain him a reprieve, perhaps it spared him from a harsher sentence. Haraldr then decrees his own judgement for the offense, and claims a large gold ring belonging to Eyvindr. Oddly, Haraldr did not attempt to dispute the charge of stinginess, and awarding himself a large gold ring from Eyvindr would seem to verify it — the normal order is for rings to go from king to skald, not the other way around. The skald was punished, but Haraldr’s ignominy was immortalized in verse — a cautionary tale about the power of the skald’s words for kings who do not adhere to proper customs. Indeed, from the way the passage reads, one might suspect that the prose was entirely based on the verse here, implying that it is the skald who ultimately had the last and only word on the matter for the judgement of history.

Eyvindr leaves the king’s service at that point, and at the end of that saga, there are some final details about him which betray Snorri’s interest in Icelanders, for it is said that:

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Eyvindr composed a *drápa* about all the Icelanders, and they rewarded him in this way, that each farmer gave him a minted coin. This corresponded to three silver pennies by weight and had to be white when notched. And when the silver was brought out at the Alþingi, then people decided to get silver-smiths to purify the silver. Afterwards a cloak-pin was made of it, and some of it was used to pay the silver-smith his fee. Then the pin weighed fifty marks. They sent it to Eyvindr.\(^{192}\)

The passage shows that the Icelanders take seriously the tradition of a right reward for a fine poem. It might have been easy for them to abandon the tradition in their far-off land, especially since they have no rich kings or jarls. Instead, the farmers arrange a creative pooling of resources and get together at the Alþingi to have it cast in the traditional form of a significant personal item. It is only right that if Snorri is expecting the Norwegian court to uphold skaldic custom, then he should portray the Icelanders he represents as upholding it also. Furthermore, the tale may also make the subtle point that a king, who commands great resources at his personal whim, would look exceptionally bad in comparison to these farmers if he did not offer the proper rewards. One might suspect that this scene was meant to deliberately contrast Haraldr gráfeldr’s earlier stinginess.

3.11 Hallfrøðr vandræðaskáld Óttarsson: Entering a King’s Service

In *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, there is an example of a skald, Hallfrøðr vandræðaskáld Óttarsson, entering into a king’s service.\(^{193}\) This is a scene that is perhaps best described as a negotiation whereby Hallfrøðr and Óláfr Tryggvason test each other — an inevitability for any non-Christian skald confronting this Christian king. Óláfr recognizes him during his approach, assumes he wants to become his follower, and typically presumes baptism as part of the deal. The skald, perhaps to make sure he is given sufficient honor, counters by insisting


on Óláfr himself as his baptismal sponsor, which Óláfr agrees to, and it is done. Having previously served Óláfr’s enemy, Hákon jarl, he asks for assurances that he will not be driven away. Óláfr declines, citing Hallfrøðr’s reputation. The skald then suggests that Óláfr kill him instead. Óláfr evades the suggestion that he kill someone he just served as godfather for, and instead calls him a vandráðaskáld (‘problem-poet’), taking him as a follower nonetheless. The clever skald seizes the opportunity to remind the king that by naming him, a naming gift is due. The king turns it right around, gives him a sword without a scabbard, and challenges him to make the customary verse in praise of the gift, with the condition that he is to use sverð (‘sword’) in each line. Hallfrøðr succeeds and includes the suggestion that he be given a scabbard in the verse, and is thus given a scabbard. Finally, there is a direct reminder at the end of the scene that Hallfrøðr’s poems serve to verify the stories about Óláfr Tryggvason. No dilemma of conscience appears here, as it does in a different version of this story where Hallfrøðr wrestles with his abandonment of his former gods, using skaldic verses to do so. However, this is entirely in line with Snorri’s tendency to minimize the religious conflict in matters where skalds are involved. There are no skalds making objections when the two kings Óláfr are evangelizing all over Norway, nor are any skalds cheering them on — neither portrayal would help Snorri’s cause. Another sort of back-and-forth between a king and his skald, although after the skald has joined the king’s service, is seen outside of Heimskringla with Haraldr Sigurðarson, when he challenges one of his skalds to make verses about an argument between a tanner and a blacksmith, in which the quarrelers are portrayed as mythological figures. Such give-and-take enables each to be satisfied that he has the proper respect due his position.

On the matter of making a verse in response to a king’s gift, it may be noted that it is not limited to court skalds. There is the case of Brynjólfr úlfaldi, primarily a farmer and local leader, who aids Óláfr Haraldsson with a territorial dispute on the border of Sweden. When he receives gifts from the king that are likely a result of his service, he too commemorates them with poetry, showing the widespread nature of the skaldic talent and the custom.

3.12 Sigvatr skáld Þórdarson: The Central Skald

Óláfs saga ins helga is the story of Norway’s patron saint and most revered king at the time, so if Snorri intended to promote the skaldic tradition in his historical writings, this would be the most opportune place to do it. Indeed he does so, with the most significant of Óláfr Haraldsson’s skalds: Sigvatr Þórdarson. The size of his role here dwarfs that of any other skald in Heimskringla, and he takes on nearly every skaldic role that is seen in the text overall. Since this saga was written first, one may suspect that Snorri felt no need to promote skalds quite as much in the other sagas after this tour de force, although much about skalds is indeed present elsewhere in Heimskringla.

Sigvatr enters the narrative in chapter 43. First, his father is introduced as an Icelander, Þórdur Sigvaldaskáld, who composed for Sigvaldi jarl and also followed the jarl’s brother, Þorkell, pointing out that the skaldic talent can run in family lines. However, it is said that Sigvatr was raised by Þorkell, who is not a poet. Thus, Clunies Ross notes that Sigvatr was brought up “by a foster-father, who had nothing to do with the sophisticated world of court poetry.” I suspect otherwise. Under the circumstances, it is reasonable to conclude that Sigvatr has learned about court life from that jarl’s brother, who was surely familiar with the jarl’s praise poetry and likely received some himself from Þórður. There is an implication of high esteem for Sigvatr’s father, as fosterage usually implies that the one raising the child is of a lesser status than the father: “ok er sá kallaðr æ minni maðr, er þórum fóstrar barn” (“and that one is always called the lesser man, who fosters another’s child”) — here, that is placing a skald above a jarl’s brother. Ultimately, perhaps feeling the implications adequate and seeing no need to include the story of Sigvatr eating the special fish — if he knew of it — Snorri completely avoids the issue of Sigvatr’s training, simply saying that: “Sigvatr var snimma skáld gott” (“Sigvatr was at an early age a good poet”).

His father became a follower of Óláfr but apparently did not compose much for him, which is indicated by the king’s resistance when Sigvatr offers to recite a poem: “Konungr

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197 Snorri, Heimskringla, ed. Bjarni, 2:54–56; Snorri, Heimskringla, trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:33–34. All mentions in my text of chapter numbers in the various Heimskringla sagas refer to these editions, which have identical numbering.
198 Clunies Ross, “From Iceland to Norway,” 60.
199 Laxdœla saga, ed. Einar ÖL. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit 5 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1934), 75; Wanner, Snorri Sturluson and the Edda, 39. See the latter also for a discussion about how Jón Loptsson had bestowed great honor on Sturla by this implication when he agreed to foster his son Snorri for him.
segir, at hann vill ekki yrkja láta um sík, segir, at hann kann ekki at heyra skáldskap” (“The
king says he doesn’t want poems to be made about him, saying he cannot listen to poetry”).

Sigvatr resorts to the higher-level discourse of a skaldic verse in order to remind Óláfr of the
proper custom:

Hlýð mínun brag, meiðir
myrkblás, þvít kannk ykrja,
alltiginn, máttu eiga
eitt skald, dráísil tjalda.
Þótt ñlûngis allra,
allvaldr, lofí skalda,
þær fæk hróðrs at hvóru
hlít, annarra nítið.
Hear my poetry, harmer
of the horse, dark, of awnings,
most noble, for I can make it;
you must have one poet.
Even if you reject altogether
all other poets’ tributes,
great ruler, still I’ll give you
glorification in plenty.

Sigvatr’s verse suggests that it is a breach of tradition for a king to be without skalds while
reminding him of the benefits of verse. (Óláfr acquires more skalds before his death, but
nothing is said of their acquisition in Heimskringla.) Thus reminded, the king is persuaded,
rewards him with a half-mark gold ring, and accepts him as a follower. Like Hallfróðr above,
entering the king’s service here involved simply approaching the king and asking, along with
negotiation and a demonstration of talent. Sigvatr’s verse reply is a celebration of the skald
and patron relationship:

Ek tók lystr, né ek lasta,
leyfð íð es þat, síðan,
sóknar Njóðr, við sverði,
sá es mín vili, þínu.
Þollr, gæztu húskarl hollan,
hófum ráðit vel báðir,
látrs, en ek lánardróttin,
linns blóða, mér góðan.
I accepted your sword gladly,
assault’s Njóðr, and will not later
find fault; that occupation
is fine; it is my pleasure.
You’ve gained a true retainer,
tree of the lair of the serpent’s
blood-brother, and I—a bargain
for us both—a good liege-lord.

Before the chapter ends, Sigvatr fulfills the role of intercessor with the king, on behalf of
some Icelanders, to air a grievance over land dues for ships. He does this with a verse, but this

203 Snorri, Heimskringla, ed. Bjarni, 2:55; Snorri, Heimskringla, trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:34.
time, however, the results of Sigvatr’s intercession are not stated. The omission might suggest that the outcome was unknown, or that Snorri felt it should be omitted. Perhaps it was unflattering to Sigvatr.

Sigvatr soon appears again, this time when Óláfr Haraldsson goes to battle against Sveinn jarl. Snorri is rather direct here about the skald as an eyewitness:

Sigvatr skáld var þar í orrostu. Hann orti þegar um sumarit eptir orrostu flokk þann, en Nesjavisur eru kallaðar, ok segir þar vandliga frá þessum tíðendum. The poet Sigvatr was there in the battle. He composed straight away in the summer just after the battle the series of verses that are called Nesjavisur, and it tells there in detail about these events.\(^{204}\)

Snorri, of course, has cited several of these verses in support of his narrative of the battle.

Sigvatr takes the role of a clever communicator in bringing bad news — the discovery of some murders and the escape of a prisoner — to Óláfr Haraldsson, who is sleeping and whom no one wishes to waken.\(^{205}\) So he has the bell-ringer at the church toll the bell for the souls of the deceased. This wakes the king back in his barracks in such a way that Sigvatr’s friend Þórðr, who is waiting there, is not at fault. When the king asks him whether it is time for óttusongsmál (‘matins’), Þórðr then replies with the critical news.

In chapter 91,\(^{206}\) Sigvatr serves as diplomat for Óláfr konungr when going to see Rœgnvaldr jarl to obtain his help for reaching a settlement with the King of the Svíar and perhaps obtaining the king’s daughter Ingigerðr as a wife for Óláfr. It is here that a significant portion of Sigvatr’s Austrfararvisur (‘East-Journey verses’) serve as the support for the text. It is also noted that Sigvatr gets an arm-ring from the jarl. Sigvatr also frequently speaks to Óláfr in verse here, especially in the report on how his mission turned out, and serves as his confidant and trusted advisor.

Sigvatr shows his daring and boldness and is again portrayed as an intimate friend of the king, when a child is born to Óláfr’s concubine.\(^{207}\) The child is very weak, and the priest at hand says it is unlikely to live and must be baptized immediately for the sake of its soul.

\(^{204}\) Snorri, Heimskringla, ed. Bjarni, 2:61; Snorri, Heimskringla, trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:37.

\(^{205}\) Snorri, Heimskringla, ed. Bjarni, 2:122–23; Snorri, Heimskringla, trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:78–79.


However, there is little time, and Óláfr had forbidden anyone to wake him up. Instead of waking the king, Sigvatr takes the bolder course of action by choosing a name and having the child baptized. The child, now named Magnús, survives. When Óláfr confronts him for this, he successfully defends himself by pointing out his motivation in Christian concern and his naming the child after the most distinguished Karla-Magnús (‘Charlemagne’). Óláfr is then pleased with his actions, and praises him saying: “Gæfumaðr ertu mikill, Sigvatr. Er þat eigi undarligt, at gæfa fylgi vizku” (“You are a very lucky man, Sigvatr. It is not surprising when luck goes with wisdom”).

In chapter 146, Sigvatr’s Vestrfaravisur (‘West-Journey verses’) seem to figure in some kind of diplomacy with Knútr inn ríki to avert his planned invasion against Óláfr. Although this does not stop Knútr’s army from setting forth from England, it is another example of a skald seeking to serve as a peacemaker.

Óláfr’s esteem for Sigvatr and the latter’s level of poetic talent are revealed when it is said:

Sigvatr skáld hafði verit lengi með Óláfi konungi, svá sem hér er ritit, ok hafði konungr górt hann stallara sinn. Sigvatr var ekki hraðmælþ maðr í sundrlausum orðum, en skáldskapr var honum svá tiltækkr, at hann kvað af tungu fram, svá sem hann mælti annat mál.

The poet Sigvatr had been with King Óláfr for a long time, as has been written here, and the king had made him his marshal. Sigvatr was not a man quick of speech in prose, but he had such facility in verse that he spoke it extempore, just as if he was saying something in the ordinary way.

This recalls Óðinn’s talent of speaking only in hendingum (‘rhymes’) in the lesser form of a human doing it only some of the time.

That level of esteem and talent likely assists Sigvatr’s return to the king’s service after the time he has spent with Knútr. An example of a skald taking on a new lord upon the death of the old one has already been seen, but here the service of multiple living lords is made clear — along with Sigvatr’s clever talent for telling exactly the right amount of truth — when he replies in verse to Óláfr’s inquiry about his service to Knútr:

Knútr spurði mik, møtra
mildr, ef hónum vildkak
hendlangr sem, hringa,
hugreifum Óleifð.
Einn kvað senn, en sònnum
svara þóttumk ek, dróttin,
gefin eru gumna hverjum
góð deði, mér søma.

Knútr asked me, with assets
open-handed, if I wanted
to be useful to him as to
Óleifr, the glad-hearted.
One lord at a time—honestly
I thought that I answered—
I said suited me; good examples
are set for every man.211

Óláfr is satisfied with his skald’s answer, and restores him to his customary seat in the hall.

The matter of loyalty is on display shortly after, when, in chapter 161, Hákon jarl Eiríksson, a friend of Sigvatr, is criticized for bringing an army against Óláfr. Sigvatr defends his honor in verse, pointing out that others are more worthy of opprobrium:

Gerðisk hilmis Hǫrða
húskarlar þá jarli
es við Óleifs fjarvi,
ofvægir, fé þægi.
Hirð esa hans at verða
hóligt fyr þvi máli.
Dælla es oss, ef allir
erum vir of svik skirir.

Those who, of the king of Hǫrðar’s
housecarls, accept money
for Óleifr’s life, would then be acting
even worse than the jarl.
It taints his retinue,
talked of in this fashion;
if all were clear of treachery.212

Yet still, Sigvatr is held in such great esteem by Óláfr that he speaks a verse to him seeking a gift at a Yuletide feast when he sees several fine swords that Óláfr has ready:

Sverð standa þar, sunna
sárs leyfum vör árar,
herstillis verðr hylli
hollust, búin golli.
Við tøka ek, vika,
vask endr með þér, sendir

Swords stand there—oars of
straits of wounds we honour—
for us the war-leader’s favour
is finest—gold-decorated.
I would accept, if you wanted—
I was with you once, spreader

elds, ef eitt hvert vildir, of gulf’s fire, great ruler—
allvaldr, gefa skaldi. to give the poet something.²¹³

The verse, of course, also reminds Óláfr of his generous nature. The king then gives him one of the swords.

In chapter 168, Sigvatr serves as a voice of proper conduct and of the king’s will during a discussion of what to do about the coming attack by Knútr inn ríki, much as Eyvindr did for Hákon inn góði when warships threatened. Sigvatr’s verses praise the king for his courage, and condemn the cowards who flee or sell out for gold.²¹⁴

At some unspecified point after this, Sigvatr travels on a pilgrimage to Rome. While he is away, the Battle of Stíklastaðir takes place, resulting in the death of Óláfr Haraldsson, which is dealt with in the next section. Sigvatr, however, lives on. In Magnúss saga ins góða, there is the report of Sigvatr learning of Óláfr’s death on his way back from Rome.²¹⁵ He laments the loss of his lord in verse for several pages in the narrative. When he finally returns to Norway, it is mentioned that he has land and children in Brándheimr.²¹⁶ However, he is discontented after reaching home, still mourning the loss of his lord. He soon begins traveling again, ultimately seeking out and becoming a follower of Magnús konungr,²¹⁷ showing that for this skald, court life carries a strong appeal.

Sigvatr reprises the role of bringing bad news to a king while in Magnús’ service.²¹⁸ When Magnús becomes oppressive by violating ancestral land rights, the people start talking of raising troops against him. The king’s friends decide amongst themselves that Sigvatr is to bring this news to the king. Sigvatr presents the message in verse, in a flokkr called Bersoglisvisur (‘Plain-speaking verses’), of which many stanzas are quoted. In them, he urges the king to moderation and the upholding of ancient laws and ancestral rights. The skaldic discourse is super effective, for immediately after them it is said:

Eptir þessa áminning skipaðisk konungr vel. Fluttu margir ok þessi orð fyrir konungi. Kom þá svá, at konungr átti tal við ína vitrustu menn, ok somðu þeir þá

lög sin. Síðan lét Magnús konungr ríta lögþók þá, er enn er í Þrándheimi ok kolluð er Grágás. Magnús konungr gerðisk vinsæll ok ástsaell òllu landsföllki. Var hann fyrir þá søk kallaðr Magnús inn góði.

After this warning the king changed for the better. Many people also used the same arguments with the king. So it came about that the king held discussions with the wisest people, and they then agreed on their laws. After this King Magnús had the law code written down that still applies in Þrándheimr and is known as Grágás. King Magnús became popular and beloved of all the people in the country. He was for this reason known as Magnús inn góði (the Good).219

Though others are given some credit here, the skald’s leadership role in this is clear. His intercession has led to the restoration of right order and a desirable outcome when bitter war might have resulted otherwise. No attention is called to the fact that this is Sigvatr’s last appearance, for apart from verse citations, he is now out of the sagas, having ended on an impressive high note. So I now turn back to the Battle of Stiklastaðir.

3.13 Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld Bersason: Skalds at the Battle of Stiklastaðir

If Snorri was consciously trying to emphasize the need for kings to have skalds as eyewitnesses to their deeds, then Óláfr’s last stand at the Battle of Stiklastaðir would be an excellent place to do so. Snorri indeed makes the most of this opportunity, and the death of a skald is featured as well. It is in the battle and the events leading up to it that Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld takes over the spotlight from Sigvatr.

As Óláfr Haraldsson and company approach the Battle of Stiklastaðir against a great number of farmers who have united against him, his troops advocate harsh measures against the rebels: burning down all their settlements.220 Even Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld agrees and speaks a verse in favor of fire. Skalds are not always heeded by their king, however. Óláfr rejects the burning, noting that when he did it before, it was against those who would not adhere to Christianity, and he claims the right to give leniency when the offense is only against himself instead of against God. Þormóðr did have the last word before Óláfr’s, however, and it did reflect a summation and reinforcement of the troops’ view on the matter.

Yet one might see that Óláfr still did pay with his life here for disregarding his skald’s advice, for he dies in the Battle of Stiklastaðir, and the troops had been suggesting that fire would break the rebellion.

In chapter 206, as the battle gets closer, Snorri attributes exceedingly convenient words to Óláfr:

Þá kallaði hann til sín skáld sín ok bað þá ganga í skjaldborgina. “Skuluð þér,” segir hann, “hér vera ok sjá þau tíðendi, er hér gerask. Er yór þá eigi segjandi saga til, því at þér skuluð frá segja ok yrkja um síðan.”

Then he called his poets to him and told them to go inside the shield wall. “You,” he says, “shall be here and see the events that here take place. You will then not have to rely on verbal reports, for you will report them and compose about them later.”

There are three skalds present — Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld, Gizurr gullbrá, and Þorfinnr munnr — and they do not wait until later to start making their verses, agreeing that they should start right away on their commemorations, and the saga quotes a stanza from each of them. The real clincher on this, however, is at the end of this short chapter, where it is remarked that: “Vísur þessar námu menn þá þegar” (“People memorised these verses on the spot”). The emphasis here on the skalds who were present offsets the noted absence of Sigvatr, who is on a pilgrimage to Rome. Of course, it has been noted how little poetry they seem to have composed about the battle, and that it is rather the poetry of the absent Sigvatr which is Snorri’s main documentation for it.

Nevertheless, Norway’s patron saint is portrayed as valuing his skalds’ eyewitness testimony and poetry about the battle, followed by immediate examples of such compositions. It is not difficult to suppose that Snorri hoped that current and future kings of Norway would wish to emulate their most esteemed predecessor in this regard, especially by reminding them that it is the skalds’ verses that get memorized. Indeed, the verses are the sole focus of what gets memorized here, rather than the king’s words, for instance. Simply put, this chapter

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223 See, for example, Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, “The Prosimetrum Form 1: Verses as the Voice of the Past,” in *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*, ed. Russell Poole (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), 185.
encourages a demand for skalds by kings, a crucial component of maintaining the poetry’s cultural capital. Indeed, it would be difficult to make this chapter any more favorable.

In chapter 208, early in the morning on the day of the battle, Óláfr asks Þormóðr to recite some poems. The skald uses the request to wake the troops and rouse them for battle. He projects his voice so that the whole army may hear him. It is said he recited *Bjarkamál in fornu*, and two stanzas of it are quoted in the text. The choice of poem suggests that skalds were masters of a great deal of legendary material, so that they could pick out poems appropriate to whatever situation they might need to recite for. The poem is well received and evidently thought a morale-booster, as the crowd gives it a name which means ‘Encouragement of Housecarls’:

\[\text{En er lokit var kvæðinu, þá þökkuðu menn honum kvæðit, ok fannsk mǫnnum mikit um ok þótti vel til fundit ok kǫlluðu kvæðit Húskarlahvǫt.}\]

And when the poem was finished, then men thanked him for the poem, and people were greatly affected and felt it was well chosen and called the poem *Húskarlahvǫt*. The king rewards him with a half-mark gold ring. For modern readers, this is reminiscent of a general making a stirring speech before his troops, except that it is a skald, not a general, that is doing it.

Finally, the great battle takes place. The death of Óláfr Haraldsson occurs along with the deaths of those three skalds who made their verses early on. Unfortunately, little is said of Gizurr and Þorfinnr. After their verse compositions in chapter 206, nothing is said of them until chapter 227, where it is simply noted that they fell in battle. Þormóðr, on the other hand, has a defiant and noteworthy death after the fall of his king. Þormóðr is badly wounded to the point where he can no longer fight, and is then struck by an arrow in the side. So he departs, reaching a barn where other wounded men are being cared for. Yet still he makes a stanza praising the king. He does not actively seek treatment himself, but makes two stanzas about his wounds, and even carries a load of firewood. When a physician finally asks

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to see his wounds, however, he agrees. The result is that Þormóðr ends by pulling out an arrowhead which had struck his heart. He sees portions of his heart on the arrowhead, and, just before dying, he says: “Vel hefir konungrinn alit oss. Feitt er múr enn um hjartarœtr” (“Well has the king nourished us. There is still fat around my heart strings”). So although his very last words were not verse, he had uttered several verses not long before, and he died spiritedly with praise for his lord.

Someone else did end with a verse, however: Jókull Bárðarson, back in chapter 182 before the Battle of Stíklastaðir. This Icelander served Hákon jarl Eiríksson against Óláfr Haraldsson, although it is not said if he was a skald or composed for the jarl. He was captured in battle against Óláfr, and was to be beheaded. Showing defiance in the face of death befitting a skald, he jerked his head at the last moment, so that the axe hit his head instead of taking it off. It was still a death wound, but it bought him enough time to sit up and utter a last stanza before passing. One would like to suppose that poetry would be considered superior to prose as a skald’s last words, so it is unfortunate that Þormóðr was not portrayed with a final stanza on his dying lips as Jókull was. In either case, the skald is a figure who has a noble, stoic death, with last words and acts of praise or defiance.

### 3.14 Skalds with Special Importance as Icelanders

My linear recounting of skalds in this chapter is at an end, and now I turn to other aspects and incidents, starting with further remarks on Icelandic skalds. Sigvatr is an Icelander, but his role as a skald is clearly more important. Sometimes, however, in the portrayal of skalds, their being Icelanders has special importance, which reveals other motives of Snorri at work. Most notable are two Icelandic skalds among the Svíar and Steinn Skaptason, who proves to be much more of a problem skald than Hallfrøðr.

In Óláf’s saga ins helga, there are some comments on the skalds at the court of the King of the Svíar that would appear to be Snorri’s biases coming through more clearly. Hjalti Skeggjason is preparing to see the King of the Svíar, and he remarks: “Ek hefi spurt, at með Sviakonungi eru íslenskr menn i góðu yrðiræti, kunningjar mínir, skáld konungs, Gizurr

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228 Snorri, Heimskringla, ed. Bjarni, 2:393; Snorri, Heimskringla, trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:263.
230 This king is also named Óláfr, so to avoid confusion, I will only refer to him as ‘King of the Svíar’ here.
“I have heard that there are Icelandic men there who are treated well, acquaintances of mine, the king’s poets, Gizurr svarti (the Black) and Óttarr svarti.”).

Snorri highlights the good treatment of these Icelandic poets, an advantageous example for both Icelandic and Norwegian audiences. That it is a Swedish king described here serves to highlight how widespread the regard for Icelandic skalds is. When Hjalti arrives, the skalds encourage the king to give him a proper welcome, demonstrating their value as contacts for Icelanders traveling abroad. The proper place of the skalds with the king is revealed not long after: “Skáldin váru opt fyrir konungi, því at þeir váru máldjarfir. Sátu þeir opt um daga frammi fyrrir hásaeti konungs” (“The poets were often in the king’s presence, for they were bold of speech. They often sat during the daytime in front of the king’s high seat”).

The skalds are enlisted by Hjalte to help persuade Ingigerðr, daughter of the king of the Svíar, to agree to a marriage with Óláfr Haraldsson, for the familiar purpose of arranging peace between the two kings — the role that Guthormr sindri took much earlier in Heimskringla.

Also in Óláfs saga ins helga, there is another portrayal of a poet being critical of a king: Steinn Skaptason. It is said he is a good poet, and poetry runs in his family as well, for it is told that his father Skapti composed a poem about Óláfr that Steinn was to present. When Steinn offers to recite it, the king insists that Steinn must recite his own compositions about him first. Steinn says that he has made none, and, rather oddly, denies being a poet. He has also been critical of the king: “Steinn batzk eigi orða ok ámælis við konung, bæði sundrlausum orðum ok samfóstum” (“Steinn did not hold back from talking to the king and criticising him, both in ordinary speech and in verse”).

There is a simple explanation for his behavior, however. He is an Icelander and is clearly upset that Óláfr had earlier forbidden him and other Icelanders from sailing back home that summer, except for one man who was to ask the Icelanders to accept Óláfr’s laws and pay taxes to him. Having angered the king by his behavior, he decides to leave, and in the process kills one of the king’s stewards. Óláfr outlaws him, but, through some clever maneuvering and calling upon an earlier promise of help from a friend in the area, he is able to escape and keep his life. Steinn eventually goes to England and finds favor with Knútr inn ríki, perhaps a

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subtle reminder that alienating a skald will likely result in him working for someone else.\textsuperscript{235} So although Snorri has portrayed this poet as causing trouble for the king, it is clearly part of a different purpose, that of reminding Norwegian kings that Icelanders are a proud people who will not tolerate injustices. It is another example of how it is good to have skalds as allies, but that offending them will backfire, although in this case, unlike the interactions between Eyvindr and Haraldr gráfeldr, there is no verse to commemorate it.

On the general importance of skalds being Icelanders, Clunies Ross notes:

Individual Icelanders, especially upwardly mobile young Icelandic men, are, on a case-by-case basis, represented as better, cleverer, and more gifted than any individual Norwegian, except perhaps the Norwegian king, against whom they frequently measure themselves. Their special talent thus enables them as individuals to be successful in Norwegian society, even though they come from the cultural margin. This stereotype, or myth, as I see it, is in large part a salve to Icelandic self-respect.\textsuperscript{236}

I agree that elements of this do come through, especially as seen above when Hallfrôðr and Sigvatr enter the services of Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson respectively. Such, however, may also serve the purpose of demonstrating to the king the value of having Icelandic skalds, that they are more gifted than Norwegians. As Icelandic outsiders without land or followers, they can also be used as allies without concern over whether they are seeking to usurp the political power of the king or his jarls for themselves. Naturally, Snorri does not call attention to the status of Icelanders as from the cultural margin, perhaps another indication that he is indeed constructing an ideal image here.

3.15 The Standards for Skaldic Poetry

Standards for proper poetry are communicated to the reader in \textit{Heimskringla} in two instances. Curiously, it is a king enforcing these standards in each case.

In \textit{Óláfs saga ins helga}, there is a cautionary tale for skalds who do not adequately consider the status of their patron.\textsuperscript{237} Þórarinn loftunga is an Icelander who has made a \textit{flokkr}

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\textsuperscript{235} Steinn here shows some parallels to Egill Skalla-Grimsson as a fiercely proud Icelander who will not tolerate injustices from a king of Norway, but nevertheless finds favor with a king of England.

\textsuperscript{236} Clunies Ross, “From Iceland to Norway,” 57.

about Knútr inn ríki. However, perhaps owing to Knútr’s status and great ambitions, Knútr considers the flokkr insufficient, and demands þórarinn produce a drápa by the next day or he will be hanged. þórarinn complies with a poem called Höfuðlausn (‘Head-Ransom’), and Knútr is satisfied, rewarding him with fifty marks of silver. This anecdote, beyond being another example of a skald using poetry to assuage the wrath of a king and save his own life, underscores the fact that the level of praise and the prestige of form that a skald offers must be commensurate with the rank of the person being praised, and at this time, Knútr has the largest holdings ever of a Norse king: Norway, Denmark, and England. Indeed, the refrain of Höfuðlausn compares Knútr to Christ.

Like Knútr inn ríki, Haraldr Sigurðarson is a king who decrees what is appropriate verse for a situation. Unlike Knútr, the poet he is criticizing is himself.238 It is just before the Battle of Stamford Bridge, and it is reported that Haraldr spoke a verse, which was in fornyrðislag, the most basic of the alliterative meters with no organized rhymes, and he used simple diction with no kennings. Haraldr, however, soon thinks better of it, and says: “Þetta er illa kveðit, ok mun verða at gera aðra vísu betri” (“This was poorly expressed, and it will be necessary to make another verse that is better”).239 He follows this with a verse in proper dróttkvætt, the standard for skaldic praise that has hendingar (‘rhymes’) in addition to alliteration, and he uses several dense kennings. Haraldr’s pronouncement on proper form reinforces Snorri’s own distinctions of meter, and Quinn has noted this in mentioning the episode: “It is clear from his poetic theory, his attribution of hendingar-composition to Óðinn, the god of poetry, as well as his own practices as a poet, that Snorri viewed dróttkvætt praise poetry as the pre-eminent form of traditional Norse versification, and that in his writings, he aimed to promote this view.”240 Certainly þórarinn’s experience with Knútr may be taken in a similar light for drápa over flokkr. That Haraldr’s skald Bjóðolf Arnórsson is with him as an eyewitness is indicated by a situational stanza which immediately follow’s Haraldr’s dróttkvætt stanza.241

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3.16 Notable Skaldic Absences: Snorri’s Lost Opportunities

For skalds at court, there are perhaps some suspicious absences, where one might think that Snorri has missed an opportunity to sell the importance of skalds and poetry. I discuss some of the more notable examples here. There is a scene of Óláfr kyrri’s court, in which the presence of various men of rank in the feasting hall is mentioned, but nothing is said about skalds in the arrangement, except via the implication of Stúfr’s participation in a toast, when a verse of his is cited in support of the feasting hall description. Similarly, when Óláfr helgi’s retinue at his royal residence is mentioned, nothing is said of skalds in that scene, although there is mention of bishops, housecarls, servants, and others.

Another notable absence is in Magnísson saga, when the kings Eysteinn and Sigurðr engage in a flyting, boasting of their accomplishments and deriding each other. There is no mention of poetry here, nor does the flyting include any verses. The absence may remind one of a scene from Orkneyinga saga in which Rognvaldr jarl boasts in verse that poetry was one of his nine skills.

In Haraldssona saga, Snorri mentions his sources for the story, which include Eiríkr Oddsson’s account with references to the reliable people that Eiríkr used as sources. There is no mention of skaldic verse here, and the implication seems to be that Snorri is largely a compiler here at best, and less of an author. However, this point is close to the end of Heimskringla, and it may easily be supposed that Snorri felt he had done enough skaldic promotion already.

Chapter 4: *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*

If Egil has spoken badly of the king, . . . he can make recompense with words of praise that will live for ever.

— Arinbjörn hersir Þórisson in *Egils saga*247

### 4.1 Opening Remarks

Here with *Egils saga*, as with *Heimskringla*, the general progression is to go in the order of the text, focusing on the skalds who are part of the action in the saga, of which there are three. Many of the same roles that *Heimskringla* skalds took are found here. However, there is a much closer and intimate portrayal of skalds in this shorter text than is found in *Heimskringla*.

### 4.2 Remarks on the Use of Verse in *Egils saga*

Much of the verse in *Egils saga* is situational, the majority of it spoken by Egill, and the parallel of conversational situational verse as the human equivalent of Óðinn always speaking in *hendingar* has already been discussed. In addition to that, Egill’s situational verse often seems as if it is his personal way of relating to and contextualizing the things that happen to him — a use of verse that modern poets can easily relate to. This seems most apparent in cases where Egill is speaking his verse as commentary instead of conversation. His verse composed in response to the news of Arinbjörn’s death,248 which is not said to be spoken to anyone in particular, is one of the most clearly illustrative in this regard:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Þverra nú, þeir er þverrðu,} & \quad \text{Their numbers are dwindling, the famous} \\
\text{þingbirtingar Ingva,} & \quad \text{warriors who met with weapons} \\
\text{hvar skal ek mildra manna,} & \quad \text{and spread gifts like the gold of day.} \\
\text{mjaðveitar dag, leita,} & \quad \text{Where will I find generous men,} \\
\text{þeira er hauks fyrir handan} & \quad \text{who beyond the sea that, nailed with islands,} \\
\text{háfjöll digulsnjávi} & \quad \text{girds the earth, showered snows of silver}
\end{align*}
\]

247 *Egil’s Saga*, trans. Scudder, 125.

248 Quinn notes that this verse and one of the three old-age verses I mention following it are unique to the M text. Even if they are omitted, the other examples remain. See Judy Quinn, “‘Ok er þetta upphaf’ — First-Stanza Quotation in Old Norse Prosimetr,” *Alvíssmál* 7 (1997): 66.
Similarly, Egill’s verse at age seven in response to his mother’s praise that he will be a great viking is one of his earliest. The whole of Sonatorrek, although not situational, is perhaps the most notable case. Egill’s last three reported verses, lamenting his infirmities in old age, may be taken similarly. These also indicate that his poetic craft has remained a part of his identity to the very end, and that he may be taking comfort in still having that power when his body has failed him. Ultimately, there is no true retirement for a maker of verse. Unlike Jökull or Þormóðr, there is no dramatic death scene or parting verse from Egill. That he uses verses in this way to relate to the world around him both at the beginning and end of his life should suffice to show it as part of his life-long use of poetry. Whaley summarizes the general uses of Egill’s various situational verses as “expressing defiance, stirring up fighting spirit, exulting over triumphs (as for example in chs 57, 64, 65, 73, 78), or commenting on miscellaneous topics from drunken brawls (ch. 44) and the misuse of runes (ch. 72) to the indignities of old age (three verses, ch. 85).”

The ability of an exemplary skald to rapidly compose verses is implied by Egill’s five situational verses spoken before, during, and after his duel with Ljótr on behalf of a kinsman of Arinbjörn. The text makes no comment on the rapidity it implies, suggesting that such a portrayal was thought unremarkable. There are other examples in the saga that imply such rapidity, such as the incident with the poisoned drinking horn described later, but the conditions of a duel are surely among the most dramatic.

4.3 Ólfr hnúfa Berðlu-Kárason: The Saga before Egill

The first skald in the saga, Ólfr hnúfa, shows up early. Unfortunately, nothing is said of his physical appearance. He is the son of a close friend of Kveld-Úlfr. Ólfr is courting the
daughter of Atli jarl, but the jarl declines his marriage proposal, considering him unworthy. Ólþvir composes mænsnongskvæði (‘love poems’) about her in response, but nothing is said of their effectiveness or of any reaction to them, although in the Icelandic Grágás law code, such compositions were a serious offense, punishable by full outlawry. Most likely, they offended Atli, since later, with no other possible provocation stated, Atli’s sons attack Ólþvir’s home, trying to kill him. Ólþvir is outnumbered, but he escapes to join Haraldr hárfagri, becoming his close friend and skald. Nothing is said of how Ólþvir learned poetry. Fidjestøl says: “It was unhappy love which turned him into a poet.” Perhaps it gave him the impetus to greatly improve his skills — love has certainly made men do much more drastic things — so that he could later contemplate royal employment for his talent after being driven off his land. However, it cannot be assumed that the love poems were the first time he ever tried to make verse. In any case, it is an example of him using poetry as a coping mechanism.

Not long after, as Haraldr’s power grows, he sends messengers to Kveld-Úlfr and Skalla-Grimr to find out where they stand with respect to that power. Their non-committal answer angers Haraldr, and though unbidden, Ólþvir takes on the role of intercessor here and assuages the king’s anger by offering to personally meet with Kveld-Úlfr to persuade him. Though his reason for doing so is certainly his close ties to Kveld-Úlfr’s family, it is another example of a skald working to keep the peace, and it is reminiscent of Þjóðólf Ör Hvini’s actions on behalf of Guðrøðr ljómi with the same Haraldr in Heimskringla.

Several more skalds are soon introduced, although none of them take part in the action. As in Heimskringla, the skalds are given high honor when their seating arrangements with the king are mentioned:

Af ǫllum hirðmönnum vírði konungr mest skáld sín; þeir skipuðu annat ǫndvegi.
Þeira sat innast Auðun ilsksælda; hann var elzt þeira ok hann haði verit skáld
Hálfdanar svarta, fóður Haralds konungs. Þar næst sat Þorbjórn hornklofi, en þar
næst sat Ólþvir hnúfa, en honum it næsta var skipat Bárdi; hann var þar kallaðr
Bárðr hvíti eða Bárðr sterki; hann virðisk þar vel hverjum manni; með þeim Ólvi
hnúfu var félagskapr mikill.

254 Egils saga, ed. Bjarni, 2; Egil’s Saga, trans. Scudder, 4.
255 Laws of Early Iceland, 2:198.
256 Egils saga, ed. Bjarni, 4; Egil’s Saga, trans. Scudder, 7.
257 Fidjestøl, “The King’s Skald,” 71.
258 Egils saga, ed. Bjarni, 5; Egil’s Saga, trans. Scudder, 8.
Of all his followers, the king held his poets in highest regard, and let them sit on the bench opposite his high seat. Farthest inside sat Audun the Uninspired, who was the oldest and had been poet to King Harald’s father, Halfdan the Black. Next to him sat Thorbjorn Raven, and then Olvir Hump. Bard was given the seat next to him and was nicknamed Bard the White or Bard the Strong. He was popular with everyone and become a close companion of Olvir’s.\textsuperscript{259}

Thus, it is seen that skalds mix closely with other highly-esteemed persons on those benches, for there is no indication that Bárðr was ever a skald. When Þóróbólfr Kveld-Úlfsson arrives to serve Haraldr, Olvir announces that arrival with effective words clearly chosen to promote a good reception, and thus Þóróbólfr begins his service in good esteem.\textsuperscript{260}

Þóróbólfr gains a great reputation at first, but his enemies, Hildiríðr’s sons Hárekr and Hrœrek, who feel he has deprived them of their proper inheritance, begin an effective campaign of slander to turn Haraldr against him. Olvir serves as an intermediary, for he is the one who brings the news to Þóróbólfr about the slanders against him.\textsuperscript{261} Although it is certainly true that Þóróbólfr is far too heedless of the machinations against him, there is little indication that the skald has done much to help him out. It seems likely that he has tried to persuade the king, but failed. So not surprisingly, the author avoids drawing attention to that. The situation worsens, and Haraldr’s forces move against Þóróbólfr, surrounding him in his house.\textsuperscript{262} Olvir serves as an intermediary again, delivering Haraldr’s surrender terms to Þóróbólfr and returning his reply. Þóróbólfr refuses, and is killed in the ensuing battle. It is then left to Olvir and his brother to bury Þóróbólfr and raise a memorial stone in his honor.\textsuperscript{263} However, there is no mention of any poem for Þóróbólfr, which is a quite a contrast to the poetic responses, short or long, that Egill will compose when faced with the death of dear family and friends.

Restrictions on the freedom of a skald are seen in the aftermath of Þóróbólfr’s death when Olvir asks for leave to return to his home, on account of not wishing to be among Þóróbólfr’s killers. The king refuses, saying: “Vil ek hann eigi lausan láta fyrir sakar ípróta hans” (“I do not want to let him go, on account of his skills”).\textsuperscript{264} Presumably, these skills

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{259} Egils saga, ed. Bjarni, 9; Egil’s Saga, trans. Scudder, 12.
\item \textsuperscript{260} Egils saga, ed. Bjarni, 9; Egil’s Saga, trans. Scudder, 12–13.
\item \textsuperscript{261} Egils saga, ed. Bjarni, 19; Egil’s Saga, trans. Scudder, 25.
\item \textsuperscript{262} Egils saga, ed. Bjarni, 26–27; Egil’s Saga, trans. Scudder, 35.
\item \textsuperscript{263} Egils saga, ed. Bjarni, 28; Egil’s Saga, trans. Scudder, 37.
\item \textsuperscript{264} Egils saga, ed. Bjarni, 29; Egil’s Saga, trans. Scudder, 38.
\end{itemize}
include his poetry. Being forced to stay, he seeks to honor Þóroðfr’s memory and gain redress for his family by encouraging the king to offer compensation. When introducing the arrival of Skalla-Grimr in seeking compensation, Olvir says to the king:

“Fá þeir margir af yðr sæmð mikla er til minna eru komnir en hann ok hvergi nær eru jafnvæl að sér gervir um flestar íþróttir sem hann mun vera. . . .” Olvir talði langt ok snjaltt, því at hann var orðfær maðr.

“Many people receive great honour from you who are less worthy of it than he is, and nowhere near as accomplished in most of his skills. . . .” Olvir spoke at length and cleverly, because he was an eloquent man.

Though he is advocating for the family of his dead friend, he is still taking up the role of reminding the king of his duty to traditional customs, showing eloquence in doing so, as was seen in Heimskringla. But for Haraldr asking Skalla-Grimr to enter his service, something that Skalla-Grimr clearly knew could never turn out well, Olvir’s efforts at reconciliation might well have succeeded, just like those of other skalds. The king takes Skalla-Grimr’s refusal poorly, however, and Olvir can then do nothing else but help Skalla-Grimr to escape. Olvir is then out of the saga, and not long after, Kveld-Úlfr and Skalla-Grimr take vengeance for Þóroðfr by killing some of the king’s men and leaving for Iceland, never to return to Norway.

4.4 Egill Skalla-Grimsson: Childhood

Poetry runs in Egill’s family. Kveld-Úlfr has the first verse of the saga, a situational verse, in responding to Skalla-Grimr’s encouragements to seek revenge for Þóroðfr’s death. Skalla-Grimr has the second verse a few chapters later, which he sends via a survivor to tell King Haraldr of the vengeance taken for Þóroðfr’s death, followed by the third verse, which is about his blacksmithing at Borg in Iceland. However, there was never any suggestion that Þóroðfr had any poetic talent, although he surely must have been exposed to verses by Kveld-Úlfr and Skalla-Grimr while growing up and before his death. It is into this poetic background that Egill is born to Skalla-Grimr and Bera in Iceland, where it is soon said: “Hann mundi verða
mjök ljótr ok líkr feðr sinum, svartr á háðr . . . Hann var brátt málugr ok orðviss” (“He would turn out very ugly and resemble his father, with black hair. . . . He became talkative at an early age and had a gift for words”).270 Although the gift with words is typical of skalds, the ugliness is not, although Torf-Einarr jarl had it. Clunies Ross notes that in the author’s portrayal, the gifts of Egill and his father and grandfather, including their poetry, seem connected with a melancholic temperament and a dark, ugly appearance.271 Perhaps they indeed contributes to his verse, but it is certainly no requirement for great poetic talent, as none of the Heimskringla court skalds have a temperament or appearance quite like Egill’s.

Egill’s first recorded verse occurs at age three when he joins a feast hosted by his maternal grandfather Yngvarr, a nearby well-to-do farmer, and it is said: “Þat var þar haft at ǫlteiti at menn kváðu vísur. Þá kvað Ýgill vísu” (“The men were entertaining themselves by making up verses while they were drinking the ale. Then Egil spoke [a] verse”).272 It is a stanza in praise of Yngvarr, and he rewards him for it with some shells and an egg. The episode serves to illustrate that bestowing rewards for praise poetry is not limited to skalds praising kings. Rather, it suggests that the poet/patron reciprocity ought to run all the way down through society to local farmers. The message to budding skalds here would be that there are potential rewards everywhere, even for those who do not think they will ever be in front of a king. There is also a message to those local farmers that they ought to encourage talent in the traditional manner, even if it is very young. Egill also made a customary verse in praise of the reward, showing that he has internalized the appropriate traditions at a young age, making him an exemplary model for others. Guðrún Nordal notes that, starting in the late 12th century, there was an increasing audience for court skalds among Icelandic chieftains.273 This episode could also be a reflection of that trend of domestic consumption, although Yngvarr is not a chieftain.

There is more to this brief incident, however. Though fantastic in many respects, if taken as what a 13th-century author thought to be plausible for the 10th century, it reveals much. It suggests that the art of verse-making was thought quite widespread that such a feast had enough guests at it to play at such entertainment, even if it is not specified whether they were composing in simple fornyðislag or ornate dróttkvætt like Egill. Although the size of

270 Egils saga, ed. Bjarni, 42–43; Egil’s Saga, trans. Scudder, 54.
272 Egils saga, ed. Bjarni, 43; Egil’s Saga, trans. Scudder, 55.
the feast is not specified, I think the context makes it likely that it was a relatively modest, and perhaps routine, neighborhood gathering — no occasion for it is indicated. It is scarcely believable that a three-year-old could compose such verse. If one admits the age to be an exaggeration and replaces it with a more reasonable number, it is still the case that Egill is portrayed as having acquired the art in early childhood. From where did he learn it? From the saga so far, the most likely source of his knowledge is his father, the only poet he is said to have been around prior to this, whose verse-making capacity has already been established. Rather than suppose that Skalla-Grímr has been deliberately teaching him, the implication may well be that Egill acquired the art by being exposed to it, in much the same way that a child acquires its native tongue by exposure without any formal lessons. That would imply that young Egill overheard a large amount of verse, but there is no cause to seriously doubt that possibility, considering his father’s talent and the widespread knowledge of the art among his neighbors. Such acquired verse-making skills would be distinct from the deliberate memorization of traditional verses about family, gods, and society, but it is not hard to imagine Skalla-Grímr trying to teach Egill some of those once he showed the capacity for it.

These conclusions are no great stretch from those of earlier scholars. Gurevich concluded that the non-supernatural method by which skalds got their skill was traditional mouth-to-ear transmission, but that the sources never made this explicit, perhaps deliberately so.274 Here, I am suggesting something she did not, that it started extremely early — one simply grew up with it. If this was the usual way — unconscious or semi-conscious acquisition in childhood — that the craft was transmitted, then the belief that skaldic skill came from supernatural means would be a natural explanation for why some youngsters had greater talent than others. Though the implications regarding children were not mentioned, this is rather close to Faulkes’ take on the matter:

Skaldic poets, it should be noted, were not professionals and had no special training: they were ordinary vikings who had developed a personal gift for poetical expression. As in later times in Iceland, where it could be said of someone one wanted to imply was extremely stupid that he could not even string a verse together, poetry was regarded as a normal and universal ability, though of course different degrees of skill were acknowledged.275

The silence of the sources on training is a natural consequence of this, just as the sources do not explain how youngsters learned farming. Sure, adult poets would continue to learn, and sometimes make innovations that they would share with others, but they would not equate this to their possession of basic competency, which they would have remembered as having from their youth.

Another perspective on this early verse of Egill’s is taken by Clunies Ross. In seeing elements of hagiography in the saga, she notes that: “The *vita* characteristically began with the birth of the saint, continued with the marvellous aspects of his childhood and education, his way of life and outstanding deeds, including miracles attributed to him, and terminated with an account of his old age and death.”276 It is in this vein that she characterizes the episode of his precocious verse as an *exemplum*.277

### 4.5 Egill Skalla-Grímsson: Adventures Abroad

The first poetic episode of Egill’s early adulthood is connected with magic when he is abroad in Norway. The likely source of his magical knowledge is easily surmised, for it is the only source of such that Egill is known to have had contact with before then, and a fair amount of it at that: “Þórgerðr brák hét ambátt Skalla-Gríms; hon hafði föstrat Egil í barnæsku. Hon var mikil fyrir sér, sterk sem karlar ok fjölkunnig mjöck” (“Skallagrim had a servant woman named Thorgerd Brak, who had fostered Egil when he was a child. She was an imposing woman, as strong as a man and well versed in the magic arts”).278 However, it may suggest that poetry and magic do not always have to go together, for there is no indication that Þórgerðr brák has any poetic talent.

The incident occurs at a feast at one of Eiríkr blóðøx’s estates, managed by Atleyjar-Bárðr.279 Egill is angrily drinking to excess because of Bárðr’s earlier stinginess. Egill becomes suspicious when he sees Bárðr make a sign over the latest horn brought to him, which Bárðr and Gunnhildr dróttning had indeed poisoned. To test the horn via magic, he carves runes on it, smears his blood on them, and then speaks a verse. The horn shatters. Then Egill decides that it is time to leave, killing Bárðr on his way out and securing the enmity of Eiríkr and Gunnhildr. Egill, like Steinn Skaptason, manages to evade the king’s wrath.

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276 Clunies Ross, “Art of Poetry,” 137.
277 Ibid., 138.
Here, both poetry and runes are essential for the magic, and it is the poetry that serves as the final trigger for producing the result. The scene is a powerful and alluring message to would-be skalds that the skaldic arts are connected with mysterious powers. Clunies Ross notes a striking parallel here with an incident in Pope Gregory’s *Dialogues*, in which St. Benedict shatters a poisoned wine bottle with the sign of the cross.²⁸⁰ Associating poetry and skalds with magical powers was not limited to *Egils saga*. One of the more impressive examples is that of Þórleifrjarlsskáld, whose verses are said to cause darkness, weapons to kill of their own accord, and the beard of Hákon Sigurðarson jarl to fall out when he gets revenge on the jarl.²⁸¹

More mundane uses of skaldic verse are seen afterwards. First, verse for persuasion as a higher form of speech — just as in *Heimskringla* — is seen when Egill and his brother Þórólfr are preparing to raid in Denmark.²⁸² There is disagreement among the men about whether they should attack the market town of Lundr. Þórólfr comes out in favor of it, and so does Egill, speaking a verse in advocacy, which is the last and deciding word on the matter — the attack follows without further discussion. Next, memorial verses are uttered by Egill at the burial of his brother, after his fall in battle in service to Aðalsteinn konungr.²⁸³ This is a parallel to Eyvindr and *Hákonarmál* on a much smaller scale, but Egill’s verse does not direct his brother to any afterlife destination.

In the aftermath of his brother’s death, at the celebration of Aðalstein’s victory in that battle, there is a description of Egill. Although much of it is too detailed to generalize from — it seems more about Egill the person rather than Egill the skald — it is the longest physical description of a skald in these three works:

> Egill var mikilleitr, ennibreiðr, brúnamikill, nefit ekki langt en ákafliga digtr, granstæðit vitt ok langt, hakan breið furðuliga ok svá allt um kjálkana, hálsdigr ok herðimikill svá að þat bar frá því sem aðrir menn váru, harðleitr ok grimmligr þá er hann var reiðr. Hann var vel í vexti ok hverjum manni hæri, úlfgrátt hárit ok þykkt ok varð snemma skollóttr. En er hann sat sem fyrir var ritat þá hlyepti hann annarri brúninni ofan á kinnina, en annarri upp í hárrætr. Egill var svarteygr ok skolbrúnn.

Egil had very distinctive features, with a wide forehead, bushy brows and a nose

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²⁸⁰ Clunies Ross, “Art of Poetry,” 140.
²⁸¹ Þórleifs þáttar jarlsskálds, 222–23.
that was not long but extremely broad. His upper jaw was broad and long, and his
chin and jawbones were exceptionally wide. With his thick neck and stout
shoulders, he stood out from other men. When he was angry, his face grew harsh
and fierce. He was well built and taller than other men, with thick wolf-grey hair,
although he had gone bald at an early age. When he was sitting in this particular
scene, he wrinkled one eyebrow right down on to his cheek and raised the other
up to the roots of his hair. Egil had dark eyes and was swarthy.\footnote{Egils saga, ed. Bjarni, 81; Egil’s Saga, trans. Scudder, 100.}

However, the particular details of the eyebrows and the harsh face align Egill with Óðinn’s
powers of shape-shifting and grim appearance as mentioned in Heimskringla and noted
above. The eyebrow effect has also been noted to make Egill appear one-eyed like Óðinn.\footnote{See, for instance, Torfi H. Túlinius, “The Prosimetrum Form 2: Verses as the Basis for Saga Composition and Interpretation,” in Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets, ed. Russell Poole (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), 211.}

Another much more subtle allusion to Óðinn, via the poem Grímnismál, may be found with
Egill’s half-drawing and then sheathing his sword in this scene.\footnote{Ibid.; and also Torfi Tulinius, Enigma of Egill, 70.} Æðalsteinn, seeing Egill’s
displeasure, gives him a ring, as compensation for the loss of his brother, and other gifts as
well. Following proper skaldic custom, Egill speaks a verse in praise of the ring. His imposing
and dark physical appearance sets him quite apart from the other skalds in the three works of
this study.

Finally, Egill takes on the role of a proper court skald for the winter that he remains
with Æðalsteinn after Þóroðfr’s death. He composes a drápa for the king, and a verse and
refrain are cited from it. The author’s description of the reward is worth a close look:
“Aðalsteinn gaf þá enn Agli at bragarlaunum gullhringa tvá ok stóð hvárr mork ok þar fylgði
skikka dýr er konungr sjálf hafði aðr borit” (“As a reward for his poetry, Athelstan gave Egil
two more gold rings weighing a mark each, along with an expensive cloak that the king
himself had worn”).\footnote{Egils saga, ed. Bjarni, 83; Egil’s Saga, trans. Scudder, 102.} Egill’s exemplariness is shown here. He gets two rings, whereas only a
single ring was awarded to the Heimskringla skalds above who were given rings as poetry-
rewards. In the cloak he receives an item of great prestige that surpasses ordinary gold, on
account of the king having worn it. Here, if nowhere else in the 13th century, the tantalizing
prospect of great rewards lives on for would-be skalds. Egill and Æðalsteinn part in great
friendship, a necessary and reassuring counter-balance to the dismal relations that Egill has with Eiríkr blóðóx. Indeed, when he later meets Aðalsteinn again, he accepts his offer to stay and enter his service, on the condition that he may go first to Iceland to get his wife and wealth. ²⁸⁸ However, news of Aðalsteinn’s death reaches him before he can return. ²⁸⁹

Like Sigvatr, Egill’s marriage and family situation are treated as completely unremarkable for a skald. In the space of a single short chapter, Egill takes a fancy to his brother’s widow, ²⁹⁰ and recites verses to her kinsman about it, Egill’s good friend Arinbjörn, and the marriage is soon arranged and held. ²⁹¹ Here, although Egill has taken the role of a lovesick poet, it is very brief and with little narrative space, like Ólvírn’s before him.

The power of Egill’s verse for persuasion is applied to a greater matter when he goes to claim his wife’s inheritance in Norway against Berg-Ǫnnundr who has usurped it. ²⁹² Even though Egill is already on bad terms with the king and queen and Berg-Ǫnnundr has boasted of having their favor, he presents his case with the help of Arinbjörn and an appeal in verse to the king to accept the oaths of the witnesses he has brought forth. Eiríkr blóðóx declines to forbid the oaths, and it looks as if Egill’s case may prevail. However, Gunnhildr dróttning sees this also and gets the court broken up to thwart the case. Egill escapes and gets ample vengeance, however. He immortalizes the king’s ignominy in a verse that anticipates the coming nidstóng:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Svá skyldu goð gjalda,} & \quad \text{Let the gods banish the king,} \\
\text{gram reki bond af lóndum,} & \quad \text{pay him for stealing my wealth,} \\
\text{reið sé røgn ok Óðinn,} & \quad \text{let him incur the wrath} \\
\text{rán mins fjár hánum.} & \quad \text{of Odin and the gods.} \\
\text{Fólkmýgi lát flýja,} & \quad \text{Make the tyrant flee his lands,} \\
\text{Freyr ok Njørðr, af jórðum.} & \quad \text{Frey and Njord; may Thor} \\
\text{Leiðisk lofða striði} & \quad \text{the land-god be angered at this foe,} \\
\text{landáss, þann er vé grandar.} & \quad \text{the defiler of his holy place.} ²⁹³
\end{align*}
\]

²⁸⁸ Egils saga, ed. Bjarni, 114; Egil’s Saga, trans. Scudder, 134.
²⁸⁹ Egils saga, ed. Bjarni, 125; Egil’s Saga, trans. Scudder, 145.
²⁹⁰ However, there is subtle evidence to suggest that Egill had desired her for sometime before that. For a discussion of it, see Torfi Tulinius, Enigma of Egill, 65–66.
²⁹¹ Egils saga, ed. Bjarni, 84–85; Egil’s Saga, trans. Scudder, 103–05.
²⁹³ Egils saga, ed. Bjarni, 93; Egil’s Saga, trans. Scudder, 113.
He also kills Berg-Odundr and the king’s son Rognvaldr. Finally, before leaving for Iceland, he erects a níóstông (‘curse-pole’) against the king and queen:

Síðan veitti hann formála ok mælti svá: “Hér set ek upp níóstong ok sný ek þessu níði á hónd Eiriki konungi ok Gunnhildi dróttningu”—hann sneri hrosshófðinu inn á land—“sný ek þessu níði á landvættir þær er land þetta byggja svá at allar fari þær villar vega, engi hendi né hitti inni fyrr en þær reka Eirík konung ok Gunnhildi ór landi.” . . . Hann reist rúnar á stönginni ok segja þær formála þenna allan.

Afterwards he made an invocation, saying, “Here I set up this scorn-pole and turn its scorn upon King Eirik and Queen Gunnhild” — then turned the horse’s head to face land — “and I turn its scorn upon the nature spirits that inhabit this land, sending them all astray so that none of them will find its resting-place by chance or design until they have driven King Eirik and Gunnhild from this land.” . . .

He . . . carved the whole invocation in runes on the pole.294

Though the invocation is not in poetry, the incident is another example of the supernatural powers that this skald was reputed to have. Yet it is surprising that the verse just quoted above was not used for the curse pole, as it would appear to be an excellent curse in itself. Whether from verse or curse, Egill has bound the king with words, for when Eiríkr is next mentioned, it is reported that he and Gunnhildr had to flee the country.295 To the would-be skald, it is shown that the best of them can well hold their own against kings.

4.6 Egill Skalla-Grímsson: Hofudlausn

Egill’s story continues, resulting in his most dramatic use of poetry in the entire saga.296 He sails for England, ostensibly to see Aðalsteinn konungr, but harsh weather drives him off course and ashore in Eiríkr blóðox’s new kingdom in York. Both his desire to travel and the harsh weather are implied to be the result of a curse from Gunnhildr. Yet before facing the king, he first meets Arinbjörn, whose assistance proves invaluable. Arinbjörn, though he is not a skald, introduces Egill’s arrival to the king, making his case with no less eloquence than Ólvar hnúfa had done with Skalla-Grimr many decades earlier. Egill embraces the king’s foot

294 Egils saga, ed. Bjarni, 98; Egil’s Saga, trans. Scudder, 119.
295 Egils saga, ed. Bjarni, 100; Egil’s Saga, trans. Scudder, 121.
296 For the entire incident, Egils saga, ed. Bjarni, 100–14; Egil’s Saga, trans. Scudder, 121–33.

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and speaks a verse. Eiríkr and Gunnhildr are angry, reminding Egill of his wrongs against them. Arinbjörn’s reply shows that reputation is at stake here: “Ef Egill hefir mælt illa til konungs þá má hann þat bæta i lofsoðum þeim er allan aldr megi uppi vera” (“If Egil has spoken badly of the king, . . . he can make recompense with words of praise that will live for ever”). Gunnhildr would have had him killed at once but for Arinbjörn’s reminder that a night killing is shameful. Thus, Egill is put in Arinbjörn’s care for the night to be brought back the next morning.

Perhaps reinforcing the standards of appropriate praise in a way that is reminiscent of Þórarinn loftunga’s drápa about Knútr inn ríki, Arinbjörn then advises Egill to compose a drápa of twenty stanzas praising Eiríkr blóðóx to save his life. As proof that this is not a vain hope, he tells Egill that this tactic allowed Bragi to keep his life after incurring the wrath of Björn Svíakonungr. That this Bragi is none other than Bragi Boddason, the semi-legendary earliest known skald, gives the tactic a prestigious ancient pedigree. Egill takes his friend’s advice, and sets to work. It is here that the saga gives a glimpse into Egill’s composing habits, at least for such a high-stakes poem. It is implied that he is completely alone in the loft where he is composing. He also needs silence, for he is unable to compose until Arinbjörn holds vigil outside his room to keep away a noisy swallow that is implied to have been Gunnhildr in a shape-shifting disguise. Finally, his composition and memorization of a long poem in a single night indicates the proficiency and memory one can expect from an exemplary skald.

In the morning, Arinbjörn vigorously advocates for Egill, even staking his own life for the cause, and again reminding the king that reputation is at stake when he says:

Engi maðr mun Eirík konung kalla at meira mann þó at hann drepi einn bónðason úttlandan þann er gengít hefir á vald hans. En ef hann vill miklask af þessu þá skal ek þat veita honum at þessi tóðendi skulu heldr þikja frásagnarverð, því at vit Egill munum nú veitask at svá at jafnsnemma skal okr moet báðum.

No one will think [King] Eiríkr any greater for killing a foreign farmer’s son who has given himself into his hands. . . . If it is reputation that he is seeking, I can

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297 Eglís saga, ed. Bjarni, 104; Egil’s Saga, trans. Scudder, 125.
298 Although no skalds were involved, a similar reminder of the shame of night killing was used to save someone’s life in Óláfs saga ins helga. Snorri, Heimskringla, ed. Bjarni, 2:201–02; Snorri, Heimskringla, trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:133.
299 According to the reading of Eglís saga, ed. Bjarni, where his identity in the text, 104, is given in the index, 293. It is likely the original audience would have also made this identification or at least suspected it.
help him make this episode truly memorable, because Egil and I intend to stand
by each other. Everyone will have to face the two of us together.300

The king showed some reluctance to proceed with the killing, and it was then that Egill
stepped forward and “hóf upp kvæðit ok kvað hátt ok fekk þegar hljóð” (“delivered the poem
and recited in a loud voice and immediately got a hearing”).301 As mentioned earlier, Þorgeirr
af Súlu also spoke hátt when he had delivered his verse seeking a hearing from Magnús inn
góði. It seems that poems, perhaps with the help of some volume, are accorded a certain
customary level of respect in this culture, as nobody had interrupted Þorgeirr, and not even
Gunnhildr interrupted Egill.

Eiríkr decided to release Egill, for he esteemed Arinbjörn and perhaps Arinbjörn’s talk
of reputation as much as he hated Egill. Certainly Egill would not have escaped alive without
his help. Yet the poem is positioned as an essential part of this as well. Although Faulkes
notes that Hófuðlausn is not a sincere poem, that does not matter: “The sincerity of the praise
of the king was irrelevant: the poem was not an expression of admiration of the king, but of
the poet’s power over the king’s destiny and his eternal reputation.”302 It is a powerful image
to put forward for prospective poets, that a skald can contend with a king and yet keep his
head. It is also a message that the skald will do well to cultivate influential friends — the
reverse to earlier, where the skald, Ölvir hnúa, was the influential friend for Skalla-Grímr’s
dealings with Haraldr hárfagr. In parting, Egill makes the customary verse in praise of the
gift of his head from the king. If he had not prepared it along with the drápa, he has
composed it on the spot, but considering Egill’s implied talents, either is possible. The verse is
perhaps a slight parody of the custom, for Egill reckons his head rather ugly, yet praises it as a
fine gift. Another such parody had occurred earlier in the saga when Skalla-Grímr made a
verse condemning an axe that Eiríkr had sent to him, although that verse was never delivered,
nor was it intended to be.303

If such a scene actually took place, surely no one at it — nor the author of the saga
hundreds of years later — could have truly realized that those words of praise would still be

301 Egils saga, ed. Bjarni, 106; the translation is mine. Although I do not refer to any of its contents, it
should be noted that the poem Hófuðlausn is not in the M text, even though the story about it is. See
ibid., 106n1.
living today. This is the centerpiece of skaldic power in the saga, in a way comparable to the scene in *Heimskringla* where Óláfr helgi commanded his skalds to be in the shield wall, so that they would compose verse according to their own witness.

### 4.7 Egill Skalla-Grímsson: Settling Down in Iceland

On his final trip through Norway, Egill arrives at a farm where a young woman is lying ill. It is revealed that someone had carved runes to try to help her, but she got worse. Demonstrating his mastery of runes, Egill investigates and discovers that the carved runes were indeed causing problems, and states this in a verse:

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Skalat maðr rúnar rista
nema ráða vel kunni.
Þat verðr mǫrgum manni
er um myrkvan staf villisk.
Sá ek á telgðu tálkni
tíu launstafi ristna.
Þat hefir lauka lindi
langs oftrega fengit.
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No man should carve runes
unless he can read them well;
many a man goes astray
around those dark letters.
On the whalebone I saw
ten secret letters carved,
from them the linden tree
took her long harm.

The verse positions Egill as an authority on such matters and again connects rune magic to poetry, although only by association this time. Egill then cuts some new runes, and the girl shows some immediate improvement. It is another demonstration that this skald commands supernatural powers, and worthy ones, for it is healing that is so often associated with Christian saints. Referring to this episode and that of the poisoned drinking horn earlier, Clunies Ross notes: “The purpose of these episodes is to align rather than equate Egill’s powers with those of Christian holy men, in order to suggest that they spring from similar roots.” It also continues the theme from *Edda* that God did not abandon the descendants of those who forgot his name but instead gave them blessings.

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304 Indeed, it was pointed out that of the Norse kings of Viking-Age York, only Eiríkr's name is known, thanks mainly to Egill. See Faulkes, “Viking Poetry,” 15.

305 *Egils saga*, ed. Bjarni, 136–37; *Egil's Saga*, trans. Scudder, 158–59. Later, the text says that these runes were actually an attempt at a love spell instead of healing, perhaps being the original cause of the sickness rather than worsening it: *Egils saga*, ed. Bjarni, 142; *Egil's Saga*, trans. Scudder, 165.


Not long after, Egill returns to Iceland to stay, and soon uses his poetic gifts close to home when Bǫðvarr, probably his favorite son, dies in a boating accident. Overcome with grief, Egill seems intent on starving himself to death. His daughter Þorgerðr is summoned and tricks Egill into breaking his fast with some milk while pretending she has come to join him in starving to death. Then she suggests the poetic remedy:

Nú vilda ek, fáðir, at vit lengðim líf okkart svá at þú mættir yrkja eríkvæði eptir Bǫðvar, en ek mun rista á keflí, en síað deyju vit, ef okr sýnisk. Seint ætla ek Þorsteinn son þinn yrkja kvæði eptir Bǫðvar, en þat hlýðir eigi at hann sé eigi erför.

Now I want us to stay alive, Father, long enough for you to compose a poem in Bodvar’s memory and I will carve it on to a rune-stick. Then we can die if we want to. I doubt whether your son Thorstein would ever compose a poem for Bodvar, and it is unseemly if his memory is not honoured.

Although the Old Norse text does not explicitly mention runes here, it must be runes that are meant, given their prior use in the saga and the extreme improbability of alternatives such as ogham or Latin letters in this context. Thus, Þorgerðr has a knowledge of runes, of which her family is the most likely source, and runes are positioned as an appropriate medium for memorial verse in addition to the oral transmission that such poems had. Although kefli is usually rendered as ‘stick,’ it would have to be one of fairly great size to contain the entire poem. However, kefli could be either singular or plural here. The rune sticks from Bryggen in Bergen, Norway are the kind that the saga’s original audience would have been familiar with through trade or travel — if they did not already use them themselves. Hundreds were found at that site ranging over the 11th to 15th centuries. One may easily envision such a stick holding a single stanza, give or take. Thus, the entire poem might be contained on a few dozen sticks. Her statement about Þorsteinn implies that he must have at least some poetic capacity for her to suggest the possibility, but probably not much.

310 *Egils saga,* ed. Bjarni, 146; *Egil’s Saga,* trans. Scudder, 171.
312 See, for example, a discussion of two half-stanzas on such rune sticks in Jonna Louis-Jensen, “To halvstrofer fra Bryggen i Bergen,” in *Festskrif til Alfred Jakobsen,* ed. Jan Ragnar Hagland, Jan Terje Faarlund, and Jarle Rønhovd (Trondheim: Tapir, 1987), 106–09.
Egill composes as she asks, resulting in the poem *Sonatorrek*. He recovers his spirits and returns to his normal life, signified by his sitting in the *ondvegi* (‘high-seat’) once again. Only the first stanza of the poem is included in the M text. However, if the rest of the poem is considered, there is a half-stanza where Egill identifies Óðinn as the source of his poetry:

| Gáfumk íþrótt | He who does battle |
| úlfs of bági   | and tackles the hell-wolf |
| vigi van       | gave me the craft |
| vammi firrða.  | that is beyond reproach. |

Since Egill is portrayed as being able to make verse from what is probably the earliest times he could remember, attributing the unremembered origin of that talent to a god is reasonable in the context.

For would-be skalds in Iceland, it is perhaps reassuring to see that such great poetic talents need not be reserved only for kings and chieftains. *Sonatorrek* shows a successful skald making great use of his talents after retiring back home in Iceland. Not long after, almost as if to underscore the point, the reader is told of *Arinbjarnarkviða*, which Egill composed in honor of his dear friend Arinbjörn. The poem leads off with Egill’s attitude toward praise poetry:

| Emk hraðkvæðr | I am quick to sing |
| hilmi at mæra, | a noble man’s praises |
| en glapmáll    | but stumble for words |
| um gloggvinga, | about misers; |
| opinspjallr    | freely I speak |
| um jófurs dáðum, | of a king’s deeds, |
| en þagmælskr   | but stay silent |
| um þjóðlygi.  | about the people’s lies. |

It is a normative view that neatly reinforces Snorri’s statement in the *Heimskringla* prologue regarding the veracity of verse as well as being a reminder about the kinds of people who should and should not receive praise poetry.

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313 *Egils saga*, ed. Bjarni, 153; *Egil’s Saga*, trans. Scudder, 176. Both the editor and the translator cited here interpret the half-stanza as being about Óðinn and poetry.

314 *Egils saga*, ed. Bjarni, 155; *Egil’s Saga*, trans. Scudder, 177–78. The M manuscript does not have the poem at this point in the text — the poem is at the end — although it did leave a blank space for a stanza. See *Egils saga*, ed. Bjarni, 155n1.
4.8 Einarr skálaglamm Helgason: Skaldic Peer Relations

After the mention of *Arinhjarnarkviða*, Einarr skálaglamm enters the saga, which presents the only personal look at relations between skalds in the three works considered here. He is described as follows: “Einarr var þegar á unga aldri mikill ok sterkr ok inn mesti atgervimaðr; hann tók at yrkja þegar er hann var ungr ok var maðr námgjarn” (“Even at an early age, Einar was large and strong and a man of great accomplishments. He began composing poetry when he was young and was fond of learning”). Much of him sounds quite similar to Egill, and perhaps it is no surprise that they become friends, and their friendship starts over poetry.

Einarr is one of Hákon jarl Sigurðarson’s men, and he composes a *drápa* about Hákon called *Vellekla* (‘Lack of Gold’). This is fortuitous for the saga writer, as referencing it is a great way to call to mind the tradition of rewards for poems. However, Hákon is angry at Einarr for unstated reasons and will not listen to the poem. The scene is quite reminiscent of Óláf Haraldsson’s reluctance to hear poems from Sigvatr. Einarr, like many skalds recounted already, resorts to verse to make his case, suggesting in it that he might leave for another jarl. Thus, Hákon relents, hears the poem, and rewards him with a precious ornamented shield, adorned with *fornsognum* (‘ancient stories’).

Back in Iceland, Einarr then leaves the shield for Egill as a gift while Egill is away. Upon discovering it, Egill says: “Gefi hann allra manna armastr! Ætlar hann at ek skyla þar vaka yfir ok yrkja um skjold hans? Nú taki hest minn; skal ek ríða eptir honum ok drepa hann” (“That scoundrel! Does he expect me to stay awake making a poem about his shield? Fetch my horse, I will ride after him and kill him”). Egill does not do so, however, for Einarr is long gone, and the remark seems somewhat in jest, as it is said they remained friends, and Einarr is now out of the saga. Nevertheless, Egill, keeping to tradition, makes a *drápa* about the shield anyway. Not long after, and showing that Egill does not really mind getting precious shields in and of themselves, it is said he receives one from Þórusteinn Þóruson, a man he had helped out during his final trip to Norway, and he composes a *drápa* about that shield also, with no report of any threats against Þóursteinn. These shield poems are another connection to the ancient skaldic tradition, for Bragi Boddason’s *Ragnarsdrápa* was also based upon a gifted, decorated shield. The continuity of the traditions over time is thus

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indicated to the readers. They also show that by developing a good reputation while abroad in one’s youth, appropriate rewards may still come to the skald even after he has retired to Iceland.

Gurevich has discussed what the story of Einarr and Egill’s relationship says about skaldic training, and I generally agree with her conclusions. First, that Einarr was already an accomplished skald and that nothing suggests he was getting any kind of verse-making training from Egill. Second, that all indications are towards them as being peers and not as being in a teacher/pupil relationship, and that the shield incident bears this out. She points out that: “A gift of a shield demanded compensation of a special kind — a shield-poem in honour of the donor.” In that light, I consider the shield incident as an example of the special sort of teasing that fellow craftsmen and equals might engage in, especially since Einarr knows perfectly well that Egill will have to make a poem in response. Like rings going from skald to king, a skald giving a decorated shield is against the customary order, hence its use as a means of teasing. However, their peer relationship is compatible with the supposition that Egill taught Einarr some verses he did not already know, perhaps about Egill’s adventures or other matters. If one accepts that verses composed in the 10th century did survive to the 13th century to be written down, then Egill and Einarr’s bonding over poetry may be a hint of such verse transmission by the experts — from older skald to younger skald.

4.9 Final Skaldic Notes on the Saga

Egill, in death, has a final parallel to Christian saints. He cannot be said to cause posthumous miracles for those who pray in his name, nor can his body lie incorrupt like Óláfr Haraldsson’s, for either of those would be blasphemous. So the saga settles on the closest it can get to a non-Christian leaving behind the holy relic of an incorrupt body: the near-miraculous properties of his bones, which are said to be much larger than normal, and which were found under the altar site of an old church — exactly the location one would expect to find a saint’s bones. Most significant is the skull, which is reported to be very heavy and

319 Ibid., 64.
320 There is also a discussion of Egill’s bones in Torfi Tulinius, Enigma of Egill, 100–03. Torfi does not make the comparison to incorruptness that I do here, and he suggests that the burial under the altar was perhaps for obtaining salvation for Egill by burying him in consecrated ground, as he had been prime-signed.
which does not break or crack even when struck by an axe-wielding priest. Considering the
whole of the hagiography allusions, they may be a suggestion that the skald of Christian times
may thus seek to go all the way to sainthood, with the pre-Christian Egill as a foreshadowing.

The skald is held in high regard in the lists of descendants scattered among Egils saga. When such lists are mentioned, it is noted if the person is a man of rank, such as a skald, nobleman, or lawspeaker. Lesser designations, such as for farmers or blacksmiths, are not found. In that regard, it is pointed out that the descendants of Olvir hnúfa’s brother include Eyvindr skáldaspillir and that Ketill hœngr’s descendants include Vetrliði skáld. At the end of the saga, although the poet-descendants are not named, it is said: “Frá Þorsteini er mikil ætt komin ok margt stórmenni ok skáld morg” (“A great family is descended from Thorstein which includes many prominent men and poets”). However, two poets, Gunnlaugr ormstunga and Skáld-Hrafn, are listed as contending for the love of one of the female descendants. It is a subtle way of positioning the importance of skalds in the background of the saga in addition to their overt presence in the action. Considering Egill’s thwarting of Norwegian kings, Meylan sees another possibility in these genealogical statements, that “Icelandic poets who are descended from Egill . . . have inherited a particular ability to deal with encroaching kings.”

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321 Egils saga, ed. Bjarni, 181–82; Egil’s Saga, trans. Scudder, 204.
322 Egils saga, ed. Bjarni, 29; Egil’s Saga, trans. Scudder, 38.
324 Egils saga, ed. Bjarni, 182; Egil’s Saga, trans. Scudder, 204.
Chapter 5: Conclusions

Hear my poetry, . . . for I can make it; you must have one poet. Even if you reject altogether all other poets’ tributes, great ruler, still I’ll give you glorification in plenty.

— Sigvatr skáld Þórdarson in Óláfs saga ins helga

5.1 The Vision of the Skald

Overall, this synchronic view of the skald in three contemporaneous 13th-century works is a diachronic mash that produces a rich ferment, since it is heavily based on portrayals of the past. A broad-ranging vision of the skald may indeed be distilled from it. It is a vision that is constructed entirely through the exemplars and how they are portrayed, for the three works do not make overt or detached statements of what a skald should and should not do. The skald that emerges is a hybrid of elements from literate culture — such as the positioning of the chief skalds as models — and of an accounting of what is represented as hundreds of years of tradition. I summarize here the view of the skald that emerges with respect to the gods, the past, myth, poetry itself, training, duties, relations to others, and more.

Óðinn is important to the skald as the source of his art, euhemerized or not, for he is the culture hero who first brought it to humans. He is the highest god for the skald and is portrayed as an exemplary lord in charge of a magnificent hall, who would thus represent the ideal patron for the skald. This precludes Óðinn himself being a model of a court skald, and so the human skald must look to Bragi, who shows the ideal skald is positioned quite close to his lord and is a master of the traditional stories and verse forms. Yet here I must conclude that Bragi as a divine exemplary skald is not developed to his full potential in these works. Óðr as deified poetry is another suggestive, but underdeveloped, image.

Though reduced to a historical figure in Edda and Heimskringla, Óðinn is not simply dead and gone. His essence is also a living influence that manifests in chieftains and skalds on occasion, as is seen in the clear-sighted and one-eyed Torf-Einarr jarl. It is even reckoned significant enough for Óðinn himself, or an extremely Óðinn-like figure, to appear briefly to Óláfr Tryggvason. Thus, the continuing relevance of him for the 13th-century skald is subtly

reinforced. Also, as a historical ancestor, he could be honored just like other ancestors, and Snorri has gone to great lengths to show him as worthy of it. Egill’s shape-shifting eyebrows and knowledge of rune magic make him another echo of Óðinn in a comparable style.

The status of the past as a guide for the would-be skald looms large in all three works. This is for nearly everything, except for the metrical forms, which are the clearest example of Snorri’s intrusion on what is otherwise portrayed as received tradition. Yet here, where Edda provides verse standards, the other two works reinforce and elaborate certain points through an appeal to past kings and skalds in the supremacy of dróttkvætt and the distinction of the drápa over the flokkar. The first known skald, Bragi inn gamli, is positioned closely with the beginning of history in the north, showing how far back the tradition goes, and he even provides an exemplary definition of a poet that shows an orientation to the craft and to Óðinn. His possible identity with Bragi of the Æsir suggests deification, or at least the prospect of lasting fame, to the would-be skald. The numerous verse quotations show much beyond commemorating the deeds of kings. They reveal past poetry and skalds as the authoritative source for the stories of the gods, the guide to the kenning, and poetry as a vehicle for learning the numerous heiti that a skald must know. The verse of Egill, on the other hand, provides a model for how a skald may relate to his own life and Icelandic society through the art. Though it cannot be known if it was actually seen in such a way in the 13th century or earlier, the mythic past of the Poetic Mead may symbolically encode a description of creative processes that aligns the skalds’ art with the emulation of both Óðinn and the dwarves. Thus, the skald re-enacts what these very first ‘poets’ did in illo tempore, reinforcing his connection with the ancient source of his art. The names of the three vessels of mead may even tell something about where poetry was thought to be located: in exciters of mind and in the blood.

Poetry itself is portrayed as having significance and power. First, it is suitable for conversational use as perhaps a mark of distinction for its speaker. Second, it is a higher form of speech that is more effective at persuasion. The examples range from simply obtaining a hearing all the way up to redeeming one’s head against an enraged king. Third, but only in Egils saga (although implied in Ynglinga saga), it is portrayed as having overt magical power when it shatters a poisoned drinking horn, and other portrayals of rune magic there are also closely associated with poetry. All of these poetic powers may be seen as having mythological grounding in Heimskringla with Óðinn, who always spoke in poetry, was very persuasive with it, and had the power to perform magic by it. It is he who is the divine exemplar, and the
human skalds show his same gifts in a reduced form that is more suitable to mere mortals. Turning to material gifts, it was seen that a short verse in praise of a gift was a traditional response, even by non-skalds, while the gift of a decorated shield seemed to carry a particularly special verse obligation.

The skald’s talent often runs in families, and these works support the sentiment that great poets were born, not made, in that culture.\textsuperscript{327} This may suggest a genetic component, although the 13th century did not have today’s understanding of such matters. It could equally well imply upbringing as a major factor. Though Egill is clearly an exceptional case, the fundamental implication of his story is that he acquired verse-making along with his native language. Though deliberate father-to-son training can only be guessed at, childhood acquisition, perhaps semi-unconsciously at whatever would be thought a suitable age, would seem to be the best explanation for those who were good poets at an early age. The texts, where many different kinds of people speak conversationally in verse on occasion, are suggestive of the kind of environmental saturation that would encourage early childhood acquisition. The transmission of traditional verses through the generations, though never explicitly dealt with, would likely also run from family to child, and perhaps from older skalds to younger skalds such as Egill to Einarr. Underlying all this, it can be surmised that the art was thought to be, one way or another, transmitted from person to person all the way back to Óðinn in \textit{Ynglinga saga}. On a different note concerning families, the skalds are integrated into society, with families and children of their own. There are only minor occurrences of the lovesick poet trope here. However, other than for Egill, the details of family life are quite scarce for the skalds in these works.

Where the skalds’ traits are described, they are eloquent and bold with speech and action, even when dealing with kings. They are clever negotiators when entering their service, insisting on the appropriate status and rewards as befits their high station. They are figures of power, perhaps some of the greatest power that is not directly linked to rulership and force of arms. In facing death, the ideal skald is defiant, like other great heroes in the Old Norse literature, and preferably still making verse as he dies. The ideal skald is capable of rapidly composing short situational verse in the moment, a feat that is seldom commented on in these works.

\textsuperscript{327} Clunies Ross also sees this in a broader selection of works, notable the \textit{skáldsögur}, and that the Mead Myth may support this view that the Poetic Mead came only to those who already had talent. See Margaret Clunies Ross, \textit{Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society}, 2 vols. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994–1998), 2:174–82.
works, suggesting that it was thought typical. Of course, for longer and more elaborate poems, such as Egill’s Hofudlausn, a skald would clearly make the most of whatever time he had. As to their physical appearance, there is too much variation across the few human details given to make generalizations. In the divine exemplars, however, Óðinn is fair and noble, and Bragi has a long beard.

The skald plays many roles in the service of his lord, most of which have at least two examples in the texts. Foremost is bearing witness to his lord’s deeds in the most durable and trustworthy form of the skaldic verse, which preserves them for future generations. In this, he is the dispenser or withholder of the human equivalent of immortality — a lasting reputation — suitably reduced from the divine immortality that Bragi has access to through his wife’s apples. Reinforcing this, metaphors for poetry equate it to fame, praise, and reputation. He is often in the king’s presence in his hall, and has a privileged position close to the king’s high seat. He may serve as his lord’s messenger and diplomat in negotiations. He seeks to make peace between warring kings, sometimes by virtue of his craft and forgoing personal rewards to do so. However, he knows when war is needed, and does his part to rouse the troops for battle in support of his king. He also brings difficult-to-hear advice to the king, which the wise king will heed and gain from or ignore at his peril. More broadly, when there is a breach of right order, he uses his unique talent or position to heal that breach. He serves as an intercessor with his lord, bringing to him important matters from those of lesser status who cannot bring them themselves. Similarly, he is a valuable contact point for visitors to that lord, especially Icelandic visitors when the skald himself is also an Icelander. In much of this, he reminds his lord of the appropriate customs and traditional behaviors that are expected in court life. On the death of his lord, it falls to him to honor his memory with a suitable memorial poem, perhaps one celebrating that lord’s status in the afterlife. The skalds here are seen staying true to that memory when they take on a new lord, even when, in the case of Eyvindr, it produces friction with the prospective new monarch. On the whole, the kings are implied as generally accepting of the necessity of skalds serving multiple patrons, whether due to death or extended absence. The skalds, in their turn, stay loyal to a just ruler who rewards them properly for their praise poetry, and rings seem most common here, with swords and other prestigious items occurring as well. As was seen, rewards can also come from Icelanders in addition to the more prototypical Norwegian lord.
5.2 The Contribution to the Authorship Case

It is not my intention here to press the case for a single author much, as that was no more than a distant secondary motive to this research. Nevertheless, having considered these three works in one study, I would be quite remiss if I did not comment on what I found. In short, the skaldic image and promotional aspects do not contradict the claims for a single author.

I have taken as a given throughout that Snorri was the author of *Edda*. It clearly promotes the skaldic craft, regardless of the motive one might assign to its author, although I do agree with Wanner’s argument that it is motivated by a desire to preserve the ability of that cultural capital to gain rewards from Norwegian Kings. Indeed, looking for how this may have been promoted was the focal point for uncovering the details of the vision of the skald. It also served to show that there is much positive promotion of the skald in all three works, confirming that it was indeed appropriate to seek an idealized image in them. However, since that was the starting point, I cannot turn it around and apply it to *Edda* for the matter of authorship there. I can only apply it to *Heimskringla* and *Egils saga* to determine whether the same motive appears to be at work, which would be a point in favor of a single author. However, I hoped to have pointed out a number of less-obvious ways in which *Edda* promotes the skaldic arts.

For *Heimskringla*, Snorri has been accepted as its author for quite some time, and the skaldic details I have uncovered can only support the case. The use of verse by both Bragi and Ægill for historical authentication in both the opening of *Gylfaginning* and in *Ynglinga saga* is certainly no strike against it (if interpolation is ruled out). The euhemerizing of Óðinn in both texts aims to make him acceptable to the 13th century. Where the skald must deliver unpleasant reproach to strong-willed kings, such as Ægill to Haraldr hárfagri and Sigvatr to Magnús inn góði, the magnitude of the favorable outcome for the king that results from heeding the skald is heavily emphasized. Where the poet might not have been heeded, such as Hildr entreating Haraldr hárfagri or where the outcome might not have been favorable, such as Sigvatr entreating Óláfr Haraldsson over some land dues, the author juxtaposes a favorable outcome anyway or moves on without comment, respectively.

In the whole of *Heimskringla*, there were perhaps missed opportunities for promoting skalds. However, in hindsight, one could always conclude that more could have been done. What was never done, however, was anything unmotivated to tarnish the image of skalds. The closest one comes to this is Steinn Skaptason, but he never quite enters Óláfr Haraldsson’s
employ, and his undeveloped role as a skald is clearly subordinate to showing that Icelanders will not tolerate overbearing kings. Also close is Eyvindr’s separation from Haraldr gráfeldr, which gives the impression of a king who has materially triumphed over his skald. However, it is the king’s reputation that is more tarnished here as a result of his ‘triumph.’

On the whole, time and again, the skald in Heimskringla seems to be deliberately portrayed, with significant care, as a valuable net-positive asset to the king who values reputation and legacy, and one that is customarily rewarded well for his services — and there are notable reminders of Iceland’s role in providing such skalds. In a work aimed at the Norwegian court, this is entirely in keeping with the purpose of Edda to promote skaldic verse, especially if its author had the motives that Wanner attributes to Snorri. For the Icelanders reading it, there is much to encourage those who would be skalds.

There is more, however, in Egils saga to appeal to the would-be skald. Egill is generous to his friends, harsh to his foes, and depicted as very powerful throughout. Though perhaps constrained by oral traditions that prevented depicting positive associations with the Norwegian kings, the opportunity to depict Egill as a great and very richly rewarded friend to an English king is not missed. By not being constrained to appeal to a Norwegian audience, the author can amplify an aspect of the skald that Icelanders would appreciate: his ability to contend with kings and sometimes get the better of them. Significant as well is the portrayal of the encouragement, use, and reward of the poetic arts in Iceland itself — even among the very young. The incredible personal power, fame, and rewards of Egill, frequently associated with his poetic talents, would serve as a subtle inspiration to future skalds.

The apparent strategy of alluding to Egill with his poetry and rune magic as a sort of proto-saint is entirely in keeping with the euhemerization of the gods in Edda and Heimskringla — each shows the authors going to great lengths to make pre-Christian figures acceptable to 13th-century Icelanders. Torfi Tulinius’ The Enigma of Egill makes the case for seeing much more deliberate care to do so in Egils saga than could be covered here, as much of it does not pertain to the image of the skald per se. Thus rehabilitated, Egill may be more easily held up as a role model to 13th-century Christian skalds. However, in the three works studied here, it seems that Egill was the only skald for whom any significant sainthood allusions were made. Nevertheless, that the rehabilitations of Óðinn and Egill — two seemingly arch-heathen figures — are carried out so strongly and thoroughly, possibly for the same purpose of promoting the traditional skaldic arts, is another detail that would suggest
their being the product of a single author or of a very close milieu. Accepting that the author of *Edda* had the motives Wanner suggests, it is no stretch to suppose that he would have wanted a saga of a prominent Icelandic skald to serve as an exemplar and an inspiration to others, and *Egils saga* is certainly a suitable candidate for that. It advocates for the skaldic arts by making it clear, in a far more powerful way than *Edda* or *Heimskringla*, that it is good to be the skald.

### 5.3 Future Directions

The vision of the skald distilled from these works could be profitably applied in many directions. I will only try to name a few of them here.

Comparison to other sagas may take different forms. First, one might consider the rest of the so-called *skáldsögur* to see how the image of the skald differs there, especially when compared to Egill in particular. The unrequited love theme is certainly more prominent in them. Second, one might track how this image varies through time, to see how later Icelandic sagas change and expand upon it. If this ideal of the skald never quite corresponded to historical reality, perhaps it lived on in later literature.

Comparison to the historical reality of the 13th century might also be considered. If Snorri’s success in obtaining rewards for poetry according to these views was not quite what he hoped for, one may ask how others fared. How were his nephews, Óláfr Þórðarson and Sturla Þórðarson, influenced by this ideal? Did they or anyone else gain greater rewards for their poetry as a result of Snorri’s groundbreaking efforts? Guðrún Nordal suggests that at least some of the court skalds of the 13th century could conceivably have been “aspiring poets who sought social recognition through their verse-making.”

If that is the case, some of them may well have been influenced by a vision quite similar to the one discussed here. Of course, sufficient details might not survive to determine all of this.

Finally, one might bring parts of this vision of the skald to poets and poetry in the 21st century. This would be a difficult task, as modern poetry has moved very far away from 13th-century poetry. Yet points of similarity exist and could be built on, such as the islands of appreciation for meter in a sea of free verse. One may wryly note that the hope of reward from poetic cultural capital is still present but is certainly no less difficult to actualize than in

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Snorri’s day. Praise, blame, and memorial are still important in the modern world, and one could certainly give them some skaldic stylings. However, it is the points without similarity that have the potential for the most revolutionary impact. Modern poetry as a whole has no myth of its origins or meaning that can provide it with participation in a reality that transcends it, or with participation in collective acts of mythopoesis. Snorri’s vision could provide this, if only for a small corner of this modern literary field and some intrepid dreamers in it.
Afterword

From skalds to the Skald
as scholar I’ve quested,
through thousands of words
in this thesis work.
May this vision inspire
a valuable flow
of the welcome wine
in the world today.

I tally those skalds
who’ve taken a role.
Eldest was Bragi
of ancient days.
Others are Hallbjørn,
Eyvindr, Hallfróðr,
Pjóðólfur, Þórfinnr,
Þórarinn, and Steinn.

Two are called Gizurr,
I tally then Guthomr,
Ottarr, Þormóðr,
excellent Sigvatr,
Ǫlvir, Einarr,
and Egill of Borg.
Snorri I honor
for saving their art.

May glory and fame
go to these skalds,
and praise for their prowess
with the Poetic Mead!
In Valhöll they dwell
with Victory-Father,
while the World-Tree
yet waxes green.

Eirik’s thesis
is ended here,
useful to heroes
and useless to etins.
Hale is the reader
and helped is the getter
of this skaldic mead
and scholarly ink.
Bibliography

In accordance with the customary practice, Icelanders are alphabetized by first name here. Also, they are sometimes identified by first name only in the shortened citations in the text where appropriate. Titles beginning with ‘Þ’ are found at the end of the primary literature list, although accents and other vowel markings are ignored for purposes of alphabetization here.

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The alphabetization here puts ð after d and the letters þ, æ, œ, ö, ø, and θ in that order after z. However, accents are ignored for purposes of alphabetization. Of the footnotes, all commentary is included in the indexing, as well as scholar names in citations (but only as authors, not as editors or translators). Of the footnotes, titles of works in citations, as well as citations listing Snorri as the author, are specifically excluded.

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