



Winter Workshop, 5–6 January 2023

Why Prosimetrum? Aesthetic and Narrative Effects in the *Íslendingasögur*

SR 24, Second floor, Faculty of English, 9 West Road, Cambridge

Thursday 5 January

10–10.15 Welcome and practical arrangements: Judy Quinn

Morning session (Chair: Judy Quinn)

10.15–11 Kate Heslop (Berkeley): ‘Unspeakable stanzas: Are skaldic quotations in *Íslendingasaga* prosimetrum “voices of the past”?’

11–11.45 Stefanie Gropper and Alex Wilson (Tübingen): ‘Nested voices in the prosimetrum of the *Íslendingasögur*’

11.45–12.15 Coffee break

12.15–13 Guðrún Nordal (Reykjavík): ‘Skaldic verse as an authorial signature in the Sagas of Icelanders’

13–14 Lunch break

Afternoon session (Chair: Stefanie Gropper)

14–14.45 Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir (Reykjavík): ‘Emotive bodily imagery in the poetry of the *Íslendingasögur*’

14.45–15.30 Tarrin Wills (Copenhagen): ‘The relationship between poetry and status in the *Íslendingasögur* and *-þættir*’

15.30–16 Coffee break

16–16.45 General discussion

Friday 6 January

Morning session (Chair: Alexander Wilson)

10.00–10.45 Annette Lassen (Copenhagen): ‘The aesthetic and narrative effects of verse quotation and distribution in the three redactions of *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*’

10.45–11.30 Alison Finlay (London): ‘What’s in a name? The phantom poems of the poets’ sagas’

11.30–12 Coffee break

12–13 Database session

13–14 Lunch break

Afternoon session (Chair: Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir)

14–14.45 Alexander Wilson (Tübingen): ‘Competing geographies: Cognitive mappings of space in *Íslendingasaga prosimetrum*’

14.45–15.30 Judy Quinn (Cambridge): ‘“Hvat er þar frá at segja?” Prosimetric rhythm and the nature of narrative’

15.30–16 Coffee break

16–16.45 General discussion

7.00: Dinner at La Margherita (pre-ordered menu). Please contact Francesco Colombo in advance if you wish to join us for dinner (fc407@cam.ac.uk)

Abstracts

Kate Heslop (Berkeley): ‘Unspeakable stanzas: are skaldic quotations in *Íslendingasaga* prosimetrum “voices of the past”?’

The skaldic stanzas quoted in *Íslendingasaga* prosimetrum were influentially described by Preben Meulengracht Sørensen as a ‘voice of the past’. In my paper I hope to unpack both elements of this generative slogan. First, the past. Any passage of direct speech in a narrative makes strong mimetic claims, as an imitation *of words in words*. The sparse metatextual commentaries that have come down to us from medieval Iceland seem to claim that written skaldic stanzas reproduce an exact sequence of syllables spoken in a long-vanished moment of performance—even closer. So the stanzas are important to the sagas’ project of representing Icelandic history *wie es eigentlich gewesen*; maybe even, though it isn’t quite the same thing, to what is often called their realism. It’s strange, then, that the stanzas vary as much as, if not more than, anything in the prosimetrum, from their presence in the text at all, to their attribution and emplotment, right down to the detail of wording and syllabic structure. Scribes and rhapsodes seem to have been no more concerned to reproduce the stanzas exactly than the prose. In part one of my paper I plan to pursue this topic, of variation in the face of claimed stability, by examining how a familiar sequence of stanzas, the *Máhlíðingavísur* of Þórarinn svarti, morphs in transmission, both in the three main branches of the medieval manuscript tradition, and in the post-medieval paper manuscripts.

Second, the voice. The stanzas in the *Íslendingasaga* prosimetrum often bear witness to internal cognitive and emotional states. Margaret Clunies Ross suggests in her new book on the poetry of the sagas of Icelanders that this is one of their main functions in the prosimetrum. The extreme version of this view, positing a division of labor between prose and verse, the one ‘objective’, the other ‘subjective’, is untenable, as plenty of studies have demonstrated the capacity of the narrative prose to impart a point of view, and non-versified direct speech is often overtly emotional. But it is true that the stanzas often depict their speaker’s state of mind, and parallels such as the eddic Helgi prosimetrum have recently been convincingly argued to be built up according to a principle reserving prose for narrative and poetry for emotion. Ann Banfield takes the representation of emotion via free indirect speech to be one of the key markers of *written* narrative in particular: what she calls the ‘sentence of represented thought and feeling’ is one of the *Unspeakable sentences*, to quote the title of her 1982 book, that distinguish written narrative from oral story-telling. She further argues against the assumption that all narratives are acts of communication that presuppose a speaking voice (the narrator’s) and a listening audience, a point taken up by AC Spearing in his *Textual Subjectivity* from 2005. Some features of saga style may be traces of a new medium’s experimentation with its conditions of possibility, such as the sliding, *inquit*-less transitions between direct and indirect speech, and the shifting of the tense of narration between past and present. The transition between narrative prose and skaldic direct speech, on the other hand, is abrupt, and invariably firmly placed in the past (*Þá kvað ...*). I hope to investigate these features too on the basis of the same small sample of prosimetrum, the *Máhlíðingavísur*, considered longitudinally in its manuscript instances.

Stefanie Gropper and Alexander Wilson (Tübingen): ‘Nested voices in the prosimetrum of the *Íslendingasögur*’

Research into saga prosimetrum has tended to focus on the primary function of stanza quotation from a literary-historical perspective – that is, whether certain verses are quoted principally for aesthetic purposes or to authenticate events in the prose, and why saga writers were motivated to use this form. Yet there has been relatively little narratological research into the effect that the prosimetric form has on the encoding of voice in saga literature, especially as regards the shifting position it establishes for the narrator.

In contrast to the stylistic conventions of saga prose, which tends to use external focalisation and which effaces the narrator as an individuated presence, skaldic verse centres the speaking-I of its composer,

and often leaps jarringly between internal and external perspectives. The juxtaposition of forms in the prosimetric *Íslendingasögur* forces the narrative voice to communicate in distinct ways as it moves between discursive standpoints. Postclassical narratology has shown the fluidity and flexibility of voice as a narrative construct (Aczel 1998, 2001; Lanser 1999; Fludernik 2001; Walsh 2010), and these findings provide a framework for analysing how stanza quotation affects the encoding of voice in the sagas.

In this paper, we analyse *Grettis saga* to illustrate how the saga uses prosimetrum to encode different voices and ways of speaking in the text. Stanza quotation is used to nest the voices of Grettir and others in a variety of standpoints and on different discursive levels. We suggest that the movement of the narrating voice in the text – between different postures and personae, depending on who speaks at a given moment – is representative of how voice works generally in the sagas, but that this aspect of voice in the sagas is foregrounded more strongly through the extreme shifts in voice typical of prosimetrum involving skaldic verse.

Guðrún Nordal (Reykjavík): Skaldic verse as an authorial signature in the sagas of Icelanders

Skaldic poetry was composed before, during and after the different sagas of Icelanders were first put to writing. The manuscript transmission in the 13th and 14th centuries reveals an active audience, adding and omitting verse as new copies (even versions) of the sagas were made, forming a reception history of the poetry as seen through the manuscripts that record it. The study of skaldic poetics evolved during this time, as did the writing of the contemporary sagas. In my paper I will by looking at specific examples consider if it is possible to identify different attitudes to verse-making and its social and cultural functions in the 13th and 14th centuries.

Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir (Reykjavík): ‘Emotive bodily imagery in the poetry of the *Íslendingasögur*’

This paper examines physical markers of emotional display in the poetic corpus of the *Íslendingasögur*. In the poetry of the sagas, bodily imagery is applied to denote feelings in remarkably varied ways. We find affectionate descriptions of erotic longing, embraces and kisses, as well as vivid descriptions of love as great pain. Physical markers are applied in refined illustrations of sadness, such as by depictions of sleeplessness, unrest, hiding, being silent or having difficulties speaking. The modes can be delicately soft, as demonstrated in Gísli Súrsson’s descriptions of the weeping of his beloved wife, where he portrays her in his poetry as gathering nuts that fall from her hazel-wood of sight [EYELASHES] into her lap. On the complete opposite end, the emotive bodily imagery can be quite grotesque and even transgressive, particularly in stanzas that function as disparaging – stanzas that may perhaps be termed as ‘anti-social’ in the terms of Clunies Ross in her *Poetry in the Sagas of Icelanders*. These insulting stanzas include crude and spiteful physical references to sexual intercourse and foul-smelling sweat, accusations of impotence or that someone wants to have sex with his livestock, sexualised comparison of a woman to a mare, and kennings for female and male genitalia. Notably, the sagas allow this latter style of emotive bodily references in their verse, but not in the prose (although there are exceptions: in some redactions explicit stanzas are omitted, such as Unnr Marðardóttir’s outspoken poetry about her husband’s lack of performance in the martial bed in *Njáls saga*). In this paper, I will attempt to hypothesise on the reasons why that may be. Using the database of the project *The Íslendingasögur as Prosimetrum*, I will explore the emotive bodily imagery of the corpus with emphasis on the contrasts between the poetry and the prose.

Tarrin Wills (Copenhagen): ‘The relationship between poetry and status in the *Íslendingasögur* and -*þættir*’

The group of *þættir* consisting of *Bergbúa þáttur*, *Kumblbúa þáttur*, *Stjörnu-Odda Draumur* and *Draumr Þorsteins Síðuhallssonar* are often termed dream visions. Like many dream narratives they are not simply additions to the plot but the dreams and their content affect the material world of the dreamer. The exception – in so many ways – appears to be *Stjörnu-Odda Draumur*, which appears to be a

complex narrative-historical frame for a short legendary saga set in Götaland. In the *þættir* in general and in some instances in the sagas, poetry is often a means of changing or establishing the status of the poet, both materially and immaterially. The poet gains payment and/or recognition of higher-ranking people, thus enabling social mobility that is often imported back to Iceland, or the poetry is used to harm rivals or fix them in a lower rank, or for the poets to praise themselves in order to establish or cement their status. The overall effect of the poetry on the status of the poet is less tangible in the broader narrative than the immediate responses to it in the saga or *þáttir*. Using a framework of poetry as a status-defining instrument, we can see that the poetry of *Stjörnu-Odda Draumr* can be interpreted as having a similar function to the other dream *þættir* and some key examples of prosimetrum in the *Íslendingasögur*.

Annette Lassen (Copenhagen): 'The aesthetic and narrative effects of verse quotation and distribution in the three redactions of *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*'

Egill is one of the most renowned skalds in the sagas of Icelanders. Six poems are attributed to him: *Aðalsteinsdrápa*, *Höfuðlausn*, *Sonatorrek*, *Arinbjarnarkviða*, *Skjaldardrápa*, and *Berudrápa*, along with several *lausavísur*. The saga is transmitted in three redactions, which show significant differences in their distribution of *lausavísur* and of the three long poems which are included in printed editions of the saga: *Höfuðlausn*, *Arinbjarnarkviða*, and *Sonatorrek*. Egill is often said to be one of the most complex characters of the sagas of Icelanders: he is avaricious, stingy, violent, and confrontational, and yet he is also soft and emotional. The conflicting portrait is to a great extent painted through Egill's stanzas and poems. In 1993, Fidjestøl argued that the writer of *Egils saga* did not have to quote Egill's stanzas or poems in full because the audience of the saga were well acquainted with them. Textual variance and differing depictions of well-known characters is a formative characteristic of Old Icelandic literature and the choices of the redactor necessarily impact our reading of the saga. In this paper, I will discuss the aesthetic and narrative effects of the different distribution of verses in *Egils saga*.

Alison Finlay (London): 'What's in a name? The phantom poems of the poets' sagas'

The poets' sagas include numerous *lausavísur* attributed to their poet-protagonists, but record their longer poems only by report. A generic boundary seems to prescribe that only the opening or a *stef* of a longer poem, at most, is cited to attest to a poet's prowess – even where, as in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, the text of the poem is supplied by later scribes or editors. The emphasis, in introducing a longer poem, is on the impetus for or the mode of its composition, and its reception by its first audience. Thus, poetic composition becomes a strand within the narrative of the saga. Where the poets' sagas intersect with the *konungasögur*, anecdotes about poetic performance complicate the historical record of the oeuvre of well-known poets: how many poems did Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld compose for Óláfr Tryggvason, and Þórðr Kolbeinsson for Jarl Eiríkr Hákonarson? The textual record is complicated by cross-referencing, in the later manuscripts in which the sagas survive, where the names of poems mentioned in texts are imported and applied to verses that may not originally have belonged to them.

References to poems that may or may not have existed are particularly used in the narrative of the poets' sagas, particularly in *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*, to support the theme of poetic competition, as when Björn's satirical *Grámagafllím*, cited in fragmentary form, is capped by the probably fictitious *Kolluvísur* of Þórðr Kollbeinsson. This paper will investigate the implications for the sagas of the names of poems that are named but not cited, and what can be deduced from these names about the forms of poems that survive only in part or not at all.

Alexander Wilson (Tübingen): 'Competing geographies: Cognitive mappings of space in *Íslendingasaga prosimetrum*'

Recent developments in considerations of narrative worlds have emphasised their cognitive aspects – 'how the mind constructs stories and their world(s), either as an encoding, productive activity or as a

decoding, interpretative activity' (Ryan 2015, 12). Thinking about how narrative forms motivate the creation and interpretation of imaginative environments is fruitful for analysing the prosimetrical *Íslendingasögur*, where the synthesis of poetry and prose opens up new interpretative possibilities on a cognitive level by instigating competing narrative and authorial voices (Quinn 1997).

The varying registers and conventions used in prosimetrum, both separately within verse and prose and jointly in their juxtaposition, can be understood, in light of Bakhtin's theories of heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981), as reflecting different ways of conceptualising, constructing, and communicating spatiality. Whilst scholars have regarded disjunctions between verse and prose as indications of poor composition, it can be productive to consider whether such disjunctions represent a purposeful aesthetic desire to encode diverse perspectives within a text. Conventional saga prose depicts spatial categories as relatively fixed, but skalds use verse metaphorically reshape spaces in ways that highlight their malleable nature and imprint their identities on them. Each medium generates authoritativeness in different ways, so their combination in prosimetrical texts produces competing geographies vying for authority.

This paper takes *Víga-Glúms saga* as an example of how focusing on the spatial disjunctions of prosimetrum can enrich interpretative possibilities for decoding saga narratives. The saga's main action is framed around spatial interactions: Glúmr establishes himself in society through a land-dispute, with subsequent chapters dealing with his attempts to maintain that space, and later his eventual displacement. Both prose and verse connect ideas of space and identity, but the former does so through depictions of external actions, while the latter constructs an internalised, metaphorical relationship. These divergent modes result in different forms of cognitive mapping, producing a text in which various spatial elements are conceptualised alternately as fixed entities and as protean sources for self-actualisation and self-expression.

Judy Quinn (Cambridge): "Hvat er þar frá at segja?" Prosimetric rhythm and the nature of narrative'

The density and distribution of quoted stanzas in the prosimetrum of the corpus of *Íslendingasögur* are markedly varied, suggesting that authors of sagas in the emergent genre were experimenting with form as they crafted their narratives. In some cases it may be that poetry attributed to figures involved in the action of a particular saga were not in circulation, something that would have proved a constraint to the fashioning of prosimetrum. Other constraints that seem to have been in operation include a strong preference by narrators to quote stanzas singly, rather than *en bloc*, and, in most cases, to avoid quoting whole poems — although that tendency seems to have diminished during saga transmission.

The resultant rhythm that is created by the shift from prose to verse is therefore mainly evident at the level of the instance of quotation rather than at the level of the saga. The rhythm of single-stanza quotation can sometimes be extended, either by additional instances of single-stanza quotation or by a reiterative situation, where a saga character responds with a stanza to questions posed in prose. On the other hand, it is often the case that the speaking of a stanza constitutes the last word in a scene, with the narrative turning elsewhere in the following prose (most often marked as a new chapter in the saga text). This kind of discursive end-stop contributes to prosimetric rhythm, with the quoted stanza pausing the flow of the prose. But what effect can this have on the narrative when, within the quoted stanza, events or reactions are narrated and ideas are expressed which cast a shadow over yet to be narrated story lines? In this paper, I will explore the implications for saga narration of narrative elements within quoted stanzas as well as the rhythmic effects of different modes of staging the recitation of stanzas.