



R. G. POOLE

Viking
Poems on
War and Peace

A Study in
Skaldic
Narrative

VIKING POEMS ON WAR AND PEACE:
A STUDY IN SKALDIC NARRATIVE

The Old Norse and Icelandic poets have left us vivid accounts of conflict and peace-making in the Viking Age. Russell G. Poole's editorial and critical analysis reveals much about the texts themselves, the events that they describe, and the culture from which they come.

Poole attempts to put right many misunderstandings about the integrity of the texts and their narrative technique. From a historical perspective, he weighs the poems' authenticity as contemporary documents which provide evidence bearing upon the reconstruction of Viking Age battles, peace negotiations, and other events.

He traces the social roles played by violence in medieval Scandinavian society, and explores the many functions of the poet within that society. Arguing that these texts exhibit a mind-style vastly different from our present 'individualism,' Poole suggests that the mind-set of the medieval Scandinavian could be termed 'non-individualist.'

The poems discussed are the 'Darraðarljóð,' where the speakers are Valkyries; 'Lidsmannaflokkur,' a rank-and-file warrior's description of Canute the Great's siege of London in 1016; 'Torf-Einar's Revenge'; 'Egill's Duel with Ljótr,' five verses from the classic *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*; 'A Battle on the Heath,' marking the culmination of a famous feud described in a very early Icelandic saga, the *Heiðarvíga saga*; and two extracts from the poem *Sexstefja*, one describing Haraldr of Norway's great fleet and victory over Sveinn of Denmark, and the other the peace settlement between these two kings.

The texts are presented in association with translations and commentaries as a resource not merely for medieval Scandinavian studies but also for the increasingly interwoven specialisms of literary theory and anthropology.

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UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS
Toronto Buffalo London

www.utppublishing.com

© University of Toronto Press 1991

Toronto Buffalo London

Printed in Canada

ISBN 0-8020-5867-1 (cloth)

ISBN 0-8020-6789-1 (paper)



Printed on acid-free paper

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Poole, Russell Gilbert

Viking poems on war and peace

(Toronto medieval texts and translations; 8)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8020-5867-1 (bound) ISBN 0-8020-6789-1 (pbk.)

1. Scalds and scaldic poetry. 2. Old Norse poetry —
History and criticism. I. Title. II. Series.

PT7172.P66 1991 839'.61'008023 C91-094196-3

**Publication of this book has been made possible by a grant from
the Publications Committee, Massey University, Palmerston
North, New Zealand.**

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Preface

The poetry to be presented in this book comes down to us in our sources as the work of Scandinavians or Icelanders living between the ninth and eleventh centuries. Some of it originated at home in Scandinavia or Iceland, some of it in the British Isles. Although most of this corpus appears to be authentic, a part of it may be the work of later poets, attributed to the heroes of the Viking past as an imaginative realization of what they might have said or thought.

My particular concern in this book is with a set of poems that trace the progress of hostilities or (exceptionally) peace making. I shall argue that they constitute a special genre. They tell their story in a highly distinctive fashion: in narrow compass (five to thirteen stanzas, approximately), with use of apostrophe, dramatic monologue, and the present historic tense. Their narrative technique is characterized not by smoothness or linearity but by abruptness and jaggedness.

Skaldic narrative of the kind I shall be discussing offends against the canons of narrativity that most readers hold to be self-evident. These canons, having reached their full rigour in the classic nineteenth-century novel, with the work of Henry James as their logical extreme, are now a staple feature of mass-cultural genres (Jameson 1981). Formative here is an individualist ethos, which, where narrative technique is concerned, demands consistency with the perspective of one psyche, whether that of the protagonist, the narrator, or the reader.

In the interests it is pursuing, then, my book takes its cue from the recent critical and scholarly interest in 'anti-narrativity' (Mitchell 1981). Its focus is in one vital respect distinct from anti-narrativity, however. We are not here dealing with the fragmented narration that one associates with the fragmentation of the modern individual consciousness.

My focus is rather the fragmentation that a modern reader will discern in the poetics of traditional societies. This type of fragmentation is apparent rather than real, in that it has become discernible only with the advent of a fully modern individualism. What I shall be describing is a narrative mode that is in part non-individualist – in other words, one that is lacking the focus and consistency characteristic of individualist writing, in virtue of the fact that the modern psychological subject had not yet become fully established.

Of course there have always been deviant forms of narrativity, even when the narrative unities were *de rigueur* with most writers. One thinks, for example, of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* or Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, not to mention Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. But such bold experiments with chronological sequence or point of view, or both, are not generally felt to constitute the mainstream of narrative discourse. As a result, when criticism focuses itself on medieval texts (*Beowulf* would serve as an example) any major deviance from linear narrativity is quite commonly felt to provide grounds for scepticism regarding the manuscript text. This is very distinctly a problem with the genre to be analysed here, and has been so ever since the Middle Ages. In much twelfth- and thirteenth-century saga compilation and composition, interpretation was, as we shall see, already conducted in accordance with an individualizing and personalizing notion of the poetic text.

To establish and exemplify the genre I am referring to, I have chosen seven poems. Of these, one is in a relatively simple 'eddaic' stanza form. The other six are 'skaldic,' as that word is applied in modern scholarship, meaning that in addition to the rules of 'eddaic' poetry a strict count of syllables and an elaborate system of line-internal rhyming and consonance had to be observed.

Probably the most familiar of the seven poems is the one in 'eddaic' form, 'Darradarljód.' Here the Valkyries of Norse myth are imagined as weavers. The poem is their work-song, and their work (imaged as weaving) is winning a victory over the Irish for a young Viking king. The sustained use of weaving terminology makes this the most extraordinary example of poetic invention in the genre. Elsewhere the speaking voice is not of such a strongly characterized sort. In 'Lidsmannaflokkur' we hear a Viking warrior-skald describing the campaign that has brought Canute the Great to power in England. In this 'soldier's tale' we can detect a certain political shrewdness; the setting is London, immediately after the end of the wars, and the claims of Canute's chief ally are not to be ignored. In the extract from *Sexstefja*, we have our one example of

a safely attributable poem; the author is Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, a skald in the entourage of Haraldr harðráði (the Norwegian king whose advance to military fame began in the Varangian Guard but who was doomed to ultimate defeat in England in the year of the Battle of Hastings). The speaker recreates the scene as the king's great fleet is launched and goes on to recount its victory over Sveinn of Denmark. The 'Fridgerðarflokkur' is my one example of a poem where peace is made. Following closely upon the events told in the previous poem, it describes the negotiation of a treaty by the kings of Norway and Denmark. Here the speaker places himself among those who congratulate the peacemakers, pouring scorn upon the promoters of hostility and showing a certain suspicion of the kings themselves.

Each of these first four poems appears more or less as a unity in our sources, although editorial and critical doubt has in some cases been cast upon this unity. The three poems that follow are, by contrast, not presented as unitary works in our sources and so represent my reconstruction. I offer these reconstructions with some confidence because the narrative technique and other genre characteristics are closely similar to those of the four poems presented previously.

One of these reconstructed poems is a dramatic monologue in which Torf-Einarr, the earl of Orkney, is shown avenging his father's death. In another, the celebrated skald Egill Skalla-Grímsson becomes the victor in single combat against a berserk warrior from Sweden. Here the heroism is tinged with comic exaggeration. Finally, a poem ascribed, perhaps correctly, to Eiríkr víðsjá describes the culmination of one of the most famous of Icelandic feuds.

I provide a text, translation, and discussion of each of these seven poems. My texts are based on the transcriptions and apparatus in the A volumes of Finnur Jónsson's *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*, to which references have been provided (abbreviated to *Skj A*). In editing and interpreting these texts I have taken account of Finnur Jónsson's B volumes, together with all other modern editorial discussions known to me. Where my edited text is derived from a single particular modern edition a reference to this edition is also provided.

The topic of the relationship between poems and prose is taken up for systematic discussion in the introduction. My main concern here is with comments or narratives in the prose that purport to show how a poem or individual stanza came to be uttered. Although sometimes the prose embodies independent and even reliable-seeming traditions, I shall argue that sometimes too it is founded purely upon inferences

from statements in the poetry. Often the inferences depend on a mode of interpretation that attaches undue importance to the circumstances in which the speakers represent themselves as speaking. For example, if the poem described events in the present tense, the prose story would show the poet composing as the events dealt with in the poem took place. This is, as I shall show, one type of interpretation that has lingered on into the twentieth century. In the second chapter, an excursus on the present historic tense, I argue that this interpretation, though prevalent, is unwarranted. The present tense can be shown to belong quite idiomatically in poetry composed retrospectively. The usage is in some respects parallel to the present historic usage found so profusely in Old Icelandic prose works. Being distinguished, as I have noted, by the frequent occurrence of present-tense verbs, the poetic genre isolated in this book has been especially vulnerable to misinterpretation, to the point where its very existence has become obscured.

My exposition of these topics, some of which are of course controversial, is necessarily attended by the use of technical terminology. Fortunately, both skaldic poetry and its technical terms are now more accessible to an English-speaking audience than formerly, thanks to the appearance of two introductory works, *Scaldic Poetry*, by E.O.G. Turville-Petre (1976), and *Old Norse Court Poetry: The Dróttkvætt Stanza*, by Roberta Frank (1978). Both these books provide strangers to skaldic poetry with a detailed account of the rules and aesthetic and with a carefully annotated short anthology. In addition, Frank briefly discusses the various editions, readers, and anthologies available for those who have a command of German or the modern Scandinavian languages (*ibid* 212–13). Here I assume an acquaintance on the reader's part with the Frank and Turville-Petre introductions; some references to their definitions and explanations have been provided. I have cited all Old Norse texts in a normalized form. For the prose I follow the practice of the *Íslenzk Fornrit* series (*ÍF* in text), for skaldic poetry Finnur Jónsson's *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*, for *rímur* his *Ordbog til de ... Rímur*, and for eddaic poetry the Neckel-Kuhn edition. Names of medieval Scandinavian men and women are given in their Old Norse form. Verse is sometimes silently repunctuated so as to clarify the word order and clause structure. In quoting from *Encomium Emmæ* and *English Historical Documents* I have used the translations supplied by the editors of those works. Other translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated: they are intended to bring out the literal meaning of the words, as far as possible, and

make no pretence to literary merit. Full references to works cited in the text are supplied in the bibliography.

To reach a satisfactory sequence in the discussion of the seven major works has proved difficult. The first four poems, 'Lidsmannaflokkur' and 'Darradarljóð' in particular, pose such complex problems that I was tempted to postpone their discussion until the end of the book, out of consideration for readers who are relatively new to skaldic poetry and to the kings' sagas. The interrelationship between the various compilations in which the verses are preserved is notoriously intricate and has accordingly been the subject of intricate debate. This has inevitably involved me in what may seem a disproportionately extensive analysis of the sources. Readers who are relatively new to skaldic poetry may prefer to skip the sections of each chapter that deal with the sources, concentrating at first on the more literary part of the discussion. They might also prefer to postpone their reading of the excursus on the present tense in poetry, where the evidence and argument are also necessarily rather complicated.

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Acknowledgments

The origins of this book go back some twenty years, and in the intervening period I have incurred debts of gratitude to many people. Some of the material revised for inclusion here originally formed part of my University of Toronto doctoral thesis: this project benefited greatly from the advice and encouragement of my supervisor, Roberta Frank, along with John Leyerle, Brian Merrilees, Harold Roe, and other University of Toronto faculty, in particular the late Denton Fox. Other scholars who have provided assistance at various stages of my research are Frederick Amory, Theodore Andersson, Hans Bekker-Nielsen, Paul Bibire, Carol Clover, Ursula Dronke, David Dumville, Bjarne Fidjestøl, Peter Foote, Kari Gade, Philip Grierson, Ludvig Holm-Olsen, Shaun Hughes, Ann Johnston, Jónas Kristjánsson, Simon Keynes, John Lindow, Bill Manhire, Oliver Padel, Raymond Page, Richard Perkins, Margaret Clunies Ross, Forrest Scott, Sverrir Tómasson, Maureen Thomas, John Townsend, John Tucker, and Vésteinn Ólason. The readers for the University of Toronto Press made valuable suggestions, many of which I have used. Additionally, the staff of the Press have gone to great pains to save me from bibliographic blunders and stylistic infelicities. I am grateful to all the above-named, and must stress that any errors or misjudgments that may be found in this book are of my making, not theirs. My edition of 'Lidsmannaflokkur' and my discussion of *Sexstefja* and *Háttatal* have previously been published in *Speculum* and *JEGP* respectively: I am grateful to the editors of these journals for permission to use these materials here. My colleagues in the English Department at Massey University undertook some of my teaching during my periods of study leave. The president and fellows of Clare Hall, University of Cambridge, granted me membership of the college during the 1983–4 academic year. I am

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especially indebted to the Publications Fund of Massey University, without whose generosity the book could not have been published. Financial support for earlier stages of the project was provided by the Commonwealth Scholarships scheme, the Government of the Province of Ontario, the Canada Council, and the Killam Foundation. Finally, I owe thanks to Fiona Farrell and Susannah and Ursula Poole for indulging my attempts to survey Ultima Thule from the distant perspective of Terra Australis Incognita.

Abbreviations

AM	<i>Arnarnagnæana</i>
ANF	<i>Arkiv för nordisk filologi</i>
ÅNOH	<i>Aarbøger for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie</i>
APS	<i>Acta philologica Scandinavica</i>
BiblAM	<i>Bibliotheca Arnarnagnæana</i>
EdAM	<i>Editiones Arnarnagnæanae</i>
EHD	<i>English Historical Documents</i>
ÍF	<i>Íslenzk fornrit</i>
JEGP	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
KLNM	<i>Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder</i>
Med Scan	<i>Mediaeval Scandinavia</i>
MM	<i>Maal og Minne</i>
Neophil	<i>Neophilologus</i>
NF	<i>Nordisk filologi</i>
(N)HT	<i>(Norsk) Historisk Tidskrift</i>
Proc Battle	<i>Proceedings of the Battle Conference on Anglo-Norman Studies</i>
SBVS	<i>Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research</i>
Skj	<i>Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning</i>
SS	<i>Scandinavian Studies</i>
SSÍ	<i>Safn til sögu Íslands</i>
SUGNL	<i>[Skrifter udgivet af] Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur</i>
Vid Skr	<i>Videnskapselskapets Skrifter. II. Historisk filosofisk Klasse</i>
ZDA	<i>Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur</i>

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INTRODUCTION

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Lausavísur and Other Verses

When we attempt to study the longer poem in Old Norse, 'longer' meaning anything over five or six stanzas, we are not well served by the surviving evidence. Astonishingly few poems of any extent survive, either complete or nearly complete. Many apparent examples in the standard edition, Finnur Jónsson's *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*, are in reality a set of fragments, painstakingly but sometimes very misleadingly reassembled into a semi-coherent poem. If they ever existed, medieval anthologies of poetry in the more elaborate metres and stanza forms have not come down to us. Especially in the period before 1000 the very few longer poems that survive in substantial portions are difficult and uncertain in their interpretation. Because of the paucity and obscurity of the evidence, theories about the structure, style, narrative technique, or other aesthetic aspects of the longer skaldic poem are very insecurely based.

This means that in considering any sort of skaldic poem, whether short or long, we must have constant recourse to our only significant class of source material – those medieval Icelandic and Norwegian prose works whose text includes poetic quotations. The quotations found there are of two sorts. Some verses are presented as brief spontaneous improvisations, made up by a personage within the story in response to a particular event. Other verses are presented not as self-contained improvisations but as excerpts from more extended poems. I shall refer to the former as *lausavísur* and to the latter as 'excerpted verses.'

A simple example of a *lausavísa* is the twelfth stanza in *Egils saga*. While on a Viking expedition Egill and his brother Þórólfr learn that they are within convenient reach of Lund, a prosperous market town. They debate whether to raid it. Þórólfr is in favour, but their followers