

The Play of Skírnir

A new look at the old idea of "ancient Scandinavian drama"²¹

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scholars associated with the myth-ritual school of anthropology. It is only recently with the growing interest in the oral tradition that scholars have begun to reexamine tentatively Phillpotts' argument. One of the most recent of these scholars is the prominent Icelandic theatre historian, Sveinn Einarsson, who takes up the subject of primitive Scandinavian drama in his *Íslensk leiklist*, 1.⁵

Sveinn's quite radical argument is that some form of dance tradition (possibly accompanied by costumed "games") must have existed in Scandinavia from as far back as the Bronze Age. He is less certain, however, about the question of the links between the Eddic poems and such early pagan ritual, or whether the poems were ever performed dramatically. Like many other scholars this century, Sveinn argues that the dialogic poems like *Skírnismál* are probably "literary works"⁶ and thus probably written after the Conversion. He admits, though, that the poems have dramatic potential.

The following article means to take this argument one step further, and to demonstrate that there is in fact more to dialogic poems of the Edda than has previously met the scholarly eye. The discussion that follows concentrates primarily on the extant text of one of the Eddic poems, *Skírnismál*, from the viewpoint of the demands of *performance*, and from the viewpoint of the scribes who originally recorded these works in the manuscripts. Both of these viewpoints bring to light a number of dramatic aspects of the dialogic poems that have never been discussed in any detail before. (Readers are referred to the various translations of the Eddic poems

It is well-known that several of the Eddic poems contained in the late-thirteenth century Icelandic manuscripts, the *Codex Regius* and the *AM 748* fragment, take the form of pure dialogues, sometimes introduced or interspersed with occasional terse passages of prose. The suggestion that these works dealing with the Scandinavian gods and heroes might be early dramas is hardly new: The argument was first made more than 170 years ago by the Icelandic scholar Finnur Magnússon, who, in the notes on Danish translation of the Eddic poems, suggested that both *Skírnismál* and *Hárbarðsljóð* might have originally been performed dramatically as part of seasonal pagan rituals.²

The most detailed examination of this subject, however, was that conducted by the English scholar Bertha S. Phillpotts in her book *The Elder Edda and ancient Scandinavian drama*, published in 1920.³ Like Finnur, Phillpotts believed that the dialogic poems of the Edda were the remnants of ancient ritual dramas that had once been performed in Norway and Sweden. Phillpotts, however, added many sensible, practical observations about the form and features of the dialogic mythological poems of the Edda written in the six-line *ljóðaháttur* metre (used solely for direct speech). The weakness of her book, though, was that she tried too hard to fit the poems into the model of the Greek seasonal ritual drama that had been proposed earlier by other scholars such as Gilbert Murray.⁴ In the years following the second world war, and in the wake of one quite devastating review, Phillpotts' ideas dropped quietly out of the spotlight, along with those of the other

- 27 Adam von Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, ed. by B. Schmeidler, 1917.
- 28 *History of the Danes* (Gesta Danorum), I-II, English transl., Cambridge 1979-1980.
- 29 *Heimskringla*, ed. by Steingrímur Pálsson, Reykjavík 1944.
- 30 *Eiríks saga rauða*, ed. by Matthías Þórðarson, Reykjavík 1955.
- 31 Tydemann, William *The Theatre in the Middle Ages*, London 1978; Wickham, Glynne *Early English Stages* I-II, London 1952-1972; Wickham, Glynne *The Medieval Theatre*, 1974.
- 32 Vésteinn Ólason *The Traditional Ballads of Iceland*, Reykjavík 1982.
- 33 *Jóns saga helga í Biskupasögur* (Sagas of the bishops) I, København 1858.
- 34 *Qualiscunque Descriptio Islandiae* (ca. 1588-1589) and Arngrímur Jónsson *Chrymogæa*, Hamburg 1609. See Ólafur Davíðsson *Íslenskar gátur, skemtanir, vikinakar og þulur*, I-
- 35 IV, København 1887-1898.
- 36 *Leik og skjemi*. Festskrift til Harald Grieg, Oslo 1950.
- 37 *Bósa daga og Herrauðs*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson, Reykjavík 1950.
- 38 See also Axton op. cit.: Wolfgram, R. "Schwerttanz und Schwerttanzspiel", *Wiener Zeitschrift für Volkskunde*, 1952; Nordlind, T. *Swärdans och bågäns. Festskrift till Feilberg*, Stockholm, Kristiania and København 1911.
- 39 See Sigtús Blöndal *Væringjasaga*, Reykjavík 1954; Axton op. cit.; La Pianta, G. "The Byzantine Theatre", *Speculum* II, 1936; Voigt, A. "Le Théâtre à Byzance et l'Empire du IV au XIIe Siècle", *Revue des Questions historiques*, Paris 1931.
- 40 Stumpff op. cit. pp. 173ff.; de Vries, Jan *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* II, Berlin 1957. See also Einarsson op. cit. pp. 89ff. Lyhman op. cit.

available in most European languages.)

It is important to start by dispensing with the idea that the Eddic poems are all "literary works". Indeed, like most other Eddic poems, *Skírnismál* bears all the marks of being a predominantly oral work, possibly semi-remembered,⁷ but nonetheless transmitted and preserved orally. One notes, for example, the way the poem often makes use of large-scale repetitions in alternating questions and answers/ statements and responses as when Skírnir echoes Njörðr's (or Skaði's) initial words commanding him to go and speak to Freyr "and find out/ why the wise (or fertile) one/ is such a wildly angry man" ("ok þess at fregna/ hveim enn fróði sé/ of reiði afi": sts 2-3).⁸ All such passages are rendered in what seems to be (in writing) an unnecessarily mechanical fashion. Also worth noting is the formulaic semi-echoed shape of many lines, as in Skírnir's "I'll give you a ring" ("Baug ek þér þá gef": st. 21), answered by Gerðr's riposte, "I don't want any ring" ("Baug ek þíkkak") in the following strophe (st. 22). Any attempt to learn the poem off by heart reveals immediately the problematic interchangeability of many of these lines.⁹ None of the above features can be considered the marks of a conscious, creative author working with pen in hand. There can be little doubt that *Skírnismál* originated and lived in the oral tradition in a form that must have been formalised yet open to small-scale variations in wording.

The question of oral transmission and, in consequence, that of oral performance raises the question of the demands of the extant present text of *Skírnismál* on the original performer, whether he was reading the text aloud for others (a common enough pastime in the Middle Ages), performing it from memory, or (less likely on the basis of the extant evidence) totally recreating it.

The Eddic poems were originally received by the majority of their audiences aurally, not in print. In order to evaluate their original impact on their audiences, it is therefore necessary to examine these works from the

viewpoint of the living performance rather than that of the printed page. It is worth bearing in mind Lars Lönnroth's logical observation that "a text which is going to be performed orally must be easy to understand and survey. The audience does not have the same possibility available to a reader of looking back into the text at will, of carefully analysing sentences, of analysing the meaning of the text in peace and quiet."¹⁰ In recent years, this criterion has been effectively applied to several other early medieval European dialogic works by scholars such as Malcolm Brennan, Richard Axton, Peter Dronke, and Bruce Moore.¹¹ In such examinations, the key question is always whether the works in question could have been performed orally without the solo performer having to resort to dramatic techniques in order to make the extant text wholly comprehensible to the audience. Indeed, could a single performer have achieved such a performance alone? Considering the way in which they were performed, there is a good reason for examining the Eddic poems from this same critical viewpoint, and especially those poems written in dialogic form and in the *ljóðaháttir* (chant) metre. Indeed, it should be remembered that *ljóðaháttir* is consistently used for direct speech in the Eddic corpus, the only exception being a suspicious narrative strophe in *Vafþrúdnismál* (st. 5).

When evaluating the probable difficulty of solo performances of *Lokasenna* and *Hárbarðsljóð*, it is immediately apparent that some form of dramatic presentation must have been essential, not only because of the form of the works, but also because of their content which implies dramatic activity by almost certainly more than one performer: *Lokasenna*, for example, centres upon a dispute involving a total of fifteen speakers all of whom are supposed to be sitting in the same room at the same time. With regard to *Hárbarðsljóð*, the speed of some of the interchanges, and much of the humour of the piece would appear to depend on two performers always being present.¹² Is it possible to

reach a similar conclusion with regard to *Skírnismál* which has a more epic structure?

The following examination must of necessity be limited largely to the first part of *Skírnismál* (sts 1-25), that is the section preceding Skírnir's long speech to Gerðr. However, the first step in such a performance-orientated examination must be to decide exactly what constituted the "original" text of the poem which was recorded from the oral performer in the early thirteenth century. It is impossible to be sure what the work was like before that time. Nonetheless, it ought to be possible to accept that the extant poetic text of the poem represents a near accurate record of the poem as it was being performed during the time at which it was recorded (probably in the mid-thirteenth century).

I should state immediately that I do not think that *Skírnismál* lacks any strophes, even though some scholars have suggested this as an explanation for the prose passages in the poem.¹³ There are certain small inconsistencies which might be explained by the poem being maintained in oral form over some period of time, and, without question, as Philipotts emphasised,¹⁴ there are gaps. These are most obvious in the cases of Skírnir's crossing the wall of raging fire (sts 17-18); his possible killing of Gerðr's brother (st. 16),¹⁵ which is disputed;¹⁶ and, most obvious of all, the implied eventual meeting between Freyr and Gerðr. These, however, are all important, dramatic actions. It is hardly likely that the poets or performers would have forgotten or ignored the strophes describing these events and remembered or retained the rest. Moreover, it is highly improbable that an editor would have chosen to cut only the narrative strophes describing these events and retained the dialogue. (As was mentioned above, there is only one narrative strophe in *ljóðaháttir* in the entire Eddic corpus.)

The *ljóðaháttir* poems, however, display a particular skill in conveying action and movement solely through the medium of dialogue. This is well demonstrated in *Skírnismál*

when, immediately following a conversation with Freyr in what was presumably his hall, Skírnir suddenly states:

It is dark outside;
I say it is time for us to go
over misty mountains,
over the country of the giants.
[Myrkt er úti,
mál kveð ek okr fara
úrig föll yfir
þyria þjóð yfir].
(st. 10)

It would seem that we are now no longer inside Freyr's hall. In the space of four poetic lines, the speaker has conveyed to us precisely our new location and likely destination. This is a technique commonly encountered in medieval and Shakespearean drama where performers had to make do with a minimum of scenic effects.

The above speech raises another interesting point. I used the words "we" and "us" deliberately in the previous paragraph, for there is an intrinsic difference between the approach to narrative used in the dialogic *ljóðaháttir* works and that employed in most poems composed in the other popular metre known as *fornyrðislag* ("the old-fare metre"). Rather than facing an alienated storyteller who is there with us in the thirteenth-century farmhouse or wherever, someone who exists in our own time and is informing us about events that occurred elsewhere at a different time, we are now placed in the position of listening to a speaker who is himself "outside", about to fly over the "misty mountains". He is "I" ("ek"). In our ears, if not our eyes, the performer is seen as "being" the character in question, that is to say, he is Skírnir. There is no middle-man, and we are ourselves transported to the position of listening to him in the setting in question. Such a performance is very close indeed to the field of drama.

One obvious objection to the above might be that the extant text *does* contain a middle-

which it is recorded in the two extant manuscripts,²⁴ and in particular, the way in which the scribes chose to indicate the speakers of the various strophes.²⁵ Obviously, in an oral performance, these statements (i.e. "Skirnir qvað", "Freyr qvað" and so on), which do not form part of the poetic text, would have been disruptive since they break up the poetic rhythm of the piece. That they were originally seen as being external to the text is emphasised by the fact that in the *Codex Regius* manuscript the speaker indications (with three exceptions²⁶) are not placed in the body of the text, but deliberately written in shortened form (i.e. .s.q.; .f.q. etc.) in the outer margin of each page, parallel to the beginning of the relevant speeches.

This technique was employed with five other wholly dialogic poems in the *Codex Regius*, namely *Vafþrúðnismál* (pp. 14–16), *Hárbarðsljóð* (pp. 24–26), *Lokasenna* (pp. 29–33), *Fáfnismál* (pp. 59–62), and part of *Helgakvíða Hjörvarðssonar* (pp. 43–44), although in places it has been lost through the cutting of the pages. It also occurs in the *AM* 748 versions of *Vafþrúðnismál* (fols 3r–3v) and *Skirnismál* (fols 2r–2v). Interestingly enough, it is obviously not used with the dialogic poems *Álvismál*, *Reginismál* or *Baldurs draumar* in these manuscripts. The *AM* 748 manuscript, however, is of particular interest because this contains evidence of the scribe (or the scribe of the earlier manuscript he was copying) making a conscious decision to adopt this system of marginal notation, altering his approach in the middle of *Skirnismál*, at which point he stops noting the speakers inside the text (a system he had used in *Hárbarðsljóð* which here precedes *Skirnismál* on fols 1r–1v), and deliberately moves the notation out into the margin (on fol. 2v).²⁷ (See fig.)

The sudden decision to use the margins in this way is intriguing. Certainly this method is not very practical for an oral reading of the text using the speaker indications, since on the recto folios the indications often come after the beginning of the speeches they apply

to. Nonetheless, the marginal indications are deliberate, and in both manuscripts they were written by the scribes at the same time as the main body of the text.

The use of these marginal speaker indications has never been examined by scholars in any detail to the best of my knowledge. Its particular interest stems from the fact that such a technique is not found in any other Scandinavian manuscripts from, or prior to the time at which the *Codex Regius* and *AM* 748 manuscripts were written. In short, it is only found in the *Edda* manuscripts with those dialogic poems listed above.

Abbreviations for speaker names are certainly often used for dialogue in the manuscripts of translations of theological works like *Elucidarius*²⁸ and the *Dialogues of Gregory*,²⁹ but the notation in these cases always occurs within the body of the text. This applies also in the cases of certain manuscripts of *Konungs skuggsjá* ("The King's Mirror"),³⁰ and certain other religious dialogues, where the speaker indications are much longer. Yet, in the face of what was clearly an accepted tradition of indicating speakers within the text, the scribe of the *AM* 748 manuscript (or his predecessor) deliberately decided to isolate the speaker indications from the body of the written text. Evidently he felt that they did not constitute part of the text itself. So why make this conscious decision to break with the earlier methods used for indicating speakers of dialogue?

Interestingly enough, while marginal speaker notation of this kind is not encountered in any other contemporary Icelandic or Norwegian manuscripts, it is encountered elsewhere in certain European manuscripts from this period and earlier. Indeed, its use has recently begun to attract the attention of several scholars, most particularly Peter Dronke.³¹ Most interesting of all is that this approach is only found in manuscripts of works that appear to have been acted in some way, that is to say, in plays of some kind.³² The marginal speaker notation is there solely for benefit of the performer or

the silent reader. It is not meant to be read aloud.

Was *Skirnismál* then seen as a "play" by the scribe? Was it acted as a "play"? If one considers the extant text without any speaker directions or intermediary prose, there is reason to believe that it must have been. If a solo performer attempted to carry out the performance alone, he would have had to be a highly professional dramatic performer to avoid totally confusing his audience about what was going on in the poem at any given time.

Drama of course needs no stage, costumes, make-up, lighting, or group of players. All it needs essentially is the act of deliberate impersonation in public. The moment the performer is seen in the role of a speaking character ("I"/"ek") who is evidently meant to be someone other than the performer himself, the act, the shared make-believe world of drama, is established. Even in the simplest of performances of *Skirnismál*, the audience could not have helped identifying the performer with the "I"/"ek" who was speaking at any given time. Apart from that, the temptation for a performer to add emotion and character to speeches that have feeling in them naturally exists all the time. Yet was *Skirnismál* more than this, more than a form of ancient "radio play" for voices alone?

On closer examination, one notes that *Skirnismál* is full of present tense implications of direct visual action: "Go (walk over?) and ask/ for an audience with our son," ("Gakkt at beiða/okkarn mála mög.") orders Skaði in st. 1. "Give me a horse then," ("Mar gefðu mér þá,") says Skirnir to Freyr in st. 8. Skirnir's confrontation with Gerðr is even more immediately visual: "Do you see this sword, maid./ slim and inlaid./ that I have here in my hand?" ("Sér þú þenna mæki mæ, / mjóvan málfán/ er ek hefi í hendi hér"; sts 23 and 25); "Sit down!" ("Seztu niðr"; st. 29); and "I carve the Púrs rune./ and three other signs" ("Púrs rist ek þér/ ok þrjá stafi"; st. 36). Gerðr herself submits with the words "Better to wish you good health, lad./ receive the frosted glass./ full of ancient mead"

("Heill ver þú nú heldr, sveinn./ ok tak við hrímalkli/ fullom forns miðar"; st. 37). In addition to the above, one notes Skirnir's description of the herdsman outside Gymir's hall "Tell me shepherd./ sitting on the mound/ and watching all roads" ("Segðu þat hirðir./ er þú á haugi sitir/ ok varðar alla vega"; st. 11), and Freyr's greeting to Skirnir on his return: "Tell me Skirnir/ before you throw the saddle off your horse/ and take a step forward" ("Segðu mér þat, Skirnir./ áðr þú verpir söðli af mar/ ok þú stígir feti framarr"; st. 40). All of the above almost demand physical movement or gesture on the part of the performer, and again, movement would mean a clear move into the field of acting.

Concerning the need for more than one actor: The poem would be easily comprehensible for the audience if they were always provided with enough information about who is speaking at any given time. This is often done in the Eddic poems by a brief name indication often placed at the start of a speech. For example, in *Skirnismál*, the speaker of the first strophe says, "Arise now, Skirnir" ("Ristu nú, Skirnir"). Skirnir is evidently present, and if the following strophe forms a clear answer or reaction to this command, then it can easily be deduced that Skirnir must be the one who is replying. If such a system is used regularly, as tends to occur in the dialogues found in oral ballads, and if the strophes follow a clear regular pattern of alternate speakers, and keep within Orlík's rule for oral accounts of a limitation of two persons to a scene,³³ there is no problem. Certainly, the vast majority of oral works elsewhere keep to this rule. *Skirnismál*, however, does not.

The following will involve a brief examination of the initial strophes of *Skirnismál* as it would be without the speaker indications or prose, in order to see what problems it would pose for the first-time listener if it were performed without any resort to dramatic activities.

The opening words of the poem, "Arise now, Skirnir./ and go (walk?) over and ask/

for an audience with our son/ and find out/ why the wise (or fertile) one/ is such a wildly angry man" ("Rístu nú, Skírnir, ok gakk at beiða/ okkarn mála mög/ ok þess at fregna/ hveim enn fróði sé/ of reiði afi"), immediately raise a number of questions: Who spoke the words, and where are we situated? As was mentioned above, the prose and the introductory speaker indication are at variance, but the verse itself provides no answers to these questions, over and above the fact that the speaker, or speakers, are the parents of "enn fróði" ("the wise/fertile one"), a term that could be applied to any number of people. In short, the listeners commence the performance surrounded in uncertainty.

The next strophe (st. 2) is a clear reply to the initial speaker's command, and thus can be attributed to Skírnir, but his words provide us with little more information:

I can expect
bad words from your son,
if I go and ask for an audience
with the lad
to find out
why the wise (or fertile) one
is such a wildly angry man
[Illra orða
er mér ón at ykrom syni,
ef ek geng at mæla við mög
ok þess at fregna
hveim enn fróði sé
ofreiði afi.]

St. 3 adds even further complication:

Tell me, Freyr,
the leader of the gods
and I wish to know
why you sit alone
in the long hall,
my lord, all day.
[Segðu þat, Freyr,
fólkvaldi goða
ok ek vilia vita,
hví þú einn sitir
ennlanga sal,
minn dróttinn, um daga.]

Who is supposed to have spoken these words? Skírnir seemingly turned down the mission in the previous strophe. Another question concerns our immediate locality. The implication seems to be that we have moved to the vicinity of Freyr's hall in the space of a moment, but nothing has been said about such a move. Is Freyr really so close that one can "ganga" ("walk/go") to him so quickly? If he is on the same site as the speaker of the st. 1, why could they not just shout over to him in person? Is that in fact what they are doing now? Whatever, Freyr is now named as being present, and he is being spoken to by somebody, the exact nature of whom is not hinted at until the following strophe (st. 4). Already, it is possible to imagine that an unknowing audience would be somewhat bewildered about what is going on. In short, we are not being provided with enough information about the speakers or the situation.

The following strophes (sts 4-9) restore a little stability, and although Freyr (like Skírnir in sts 2-3) destroys the safe guarantee of an alternate strophe pattern by speaking two strophes in a row (sts 6-7), it is clear that a conversation is being carried out between him and the "young man" ("segrinn ungi") he knew "at the beginning of time" (sts 4-5). None of these strophes, however, contains any direct naming of the characters involved. They depend, instead, on the audience concentrating on the rhythm of the conversation and the nature of the words themselves. And the strophe which follows this conversation (st. 10) comes as a complete shock:

It is dark outside,
I say it is time for us to go
over misty mountains,
over the country of the giants;
Both of us will make it
or both be taken
by the all-mighty jötnn.
[Myrkt er úti,
mál kveð ek okkara
úríg föll yfir,

þyrja þjóð yfir;
báðir vit komumk
eða okkara báða tekr
sá inn ámatki jötnn.]

As mentioned above, the setting has suddenly altered, and time has passed. By the previously broken rule of alternating speakers, we guess that Skírnir ought to be speaking, even though he has not bidden Freyr farewell nor been given any instructions as to where to go. The central problem, though, concerns whom is he speaking to. Has Freyr accompanied him? The last answer that would spring to mind is that Skírnir is holding a conversation with his horse, although that is what the brief prose interpolation ("Skírnir mælti við hestinn"; "Skírnir spoke to the horse") informs later readers. Nonetheless, the scene *has been* changed effectively, and the conversation with the shepherd that follows (sts 11-13) is also well presented in terms of providing clear information about both the setting and the speakers. It might be noted, though, that the reliability of the alternating strophe pattern is broken once again when Skírnir utters a second strophe in st. 11:

Tell me, shepherd,
sitting on the mound,
and watching all roads,
how I can get to converse
with the young woman,
past Gymir's bounds?
[Segðu þat, hirðir,
er þú á haugi sitir
ok varðar alla vega,
hvér ek at anspilli
komumk ens unga mans
fyr greyjom Gymis?]
(st. 11)

Are you fated,
or are you a ghost?
You will never
reach conversational terms
with Gymir's good maid.

[Hvart ertu feigr
eða ertu framgenginn?
anspillis vanr
þú skalt æ vera
góðrar meylar Gymis.]
(st. 12)

There are better choices
than to lose courage
for the man prepared to go;
down to the day
my fate was ordained
and all my life pre-planned.
[Kostir ro betri
heldr en at klökkva sé,
hveim er fúss er fara;
eino dagri
mér var aldr um skapaðr
ok alt líf um lagit.]
(st. 13)

Up until now, the name of Gymir has loomed large as the main danger awaiting Skírnir (cf. st. 6, st. 8 and st. 10), and this should be borne in mind when we read or hear the following strophe (st. 14):

What is that resounding din
that I can hear now
within our walls?
The earth trembles,
everything quakes,
all Gymir's buildings.
[Hvat er þat hlým hlymia
er ek (hlymia) heyrir nú til
ossom rönnum í?
iðrð bifaz,
en allir fyrir
skíálfa garðar Gymis.]

Obviously neither Skírnir nor the shepherd are speaking, and the setting now appears to be indoors. The most likely assumption for the audience is that Gymir has appeared. This means that the two-to-a-scene rule is challenged (as it was perhaps earlier in st. 3), since Skírnir and the shepherd must still be present in the minds of the audience. Compli-

cations increase with the statement in the following strophe (st. 15) that "There is a man out here/ dismounted from his horse;/ he's sending the horse to graze" ("Maðr er hér úti/ stígninn af mars baki/ ió latir til iardar taka"). The logical guess would be that the shepherd, who is certainly "out here", is now speaking. In both cases, however, the speaker indications in the manuscript prove such guesses to be wrong. Gerðr, Gymir's daughter, spoke the first strophe (st. 14), although interestingly enough, she is not named until five strophes later in st. 19. During all of the intervening period, the audience could go on believing that Gymir is speaking, with all the expectations of violence that are bound to accompany such an idea. The second speaker (st. 15) is Gerðr's handmaid who is never named in the poetry at all and vanishes almost as soon as she has spoken. At this point, as far as the audience is concerned, there are three, if not four active characters present in the same scene.

The rest of the so-called "poem" is clearer, since it is largely comprised of a conversation between Skírnir and Gerðr, followed by a concluding encounter between Skírnir and Freyr. What has been pointed out above, however, should be enough to demonstrate the problems that are implicit. Unless the performer moves into the realms of dramatic impersonation by changing his voice in some way to differentiate between characters, unnecessary confusion is bound to arise in the minds of the audience. Yet if the expectation had been that one man was to present the work alone, even in a dramatic way, then surely there would have been a more regular use of direct naming of characters, as in oral ballads. The greater likelihood, as the Gerðr/Gymir problem reveals, is that more than one man presented *Skírnismál*, and that actual movement took place. This would help explain the present structure and the fact that important movement and action is often ignored in the poetic text of the work, as for example in the cases of Skírnir's leaping the flame wall, and his return home to Freyr.

performed in this way, with Skírnir moving between simple "mansions" representing Njörðr and Skaði's hall, Freyr's hall (which it would be possible then to "go/walk" to), the mound ("haugr") where the shepherd sits, and then Gymir's hall where Gerðr is surrounded by fire? If such a performance did take place, the likelihood is that it would need to be performed outside. Could such an elementary outdoor performance have taken place in the twelfth or thirteenth centuries somewhere in western Scandinavia, or even in Iceland? This cannot be ruled out. It would have taken little social organisation, and as has been shown, both the work itself and the marginal notation in the manuscript point to a simple dramatic presentation of this kind.³⁷

This leads to the question of the possible origin and original context of such a work, which seems to be a poetic drama rather than a poem – in fact one of the earliest recorded "plays" in the vernacular in Northern Europe. This "play" is not about love between normal people like many of the European dramatic works of the time based on the work of travelling actors, such as the Middle English *Dame Sirith*, or Adam de la Halle's *Le jeu de Robin et Marion*. Nor is it about a Christian theme like the early dramatic works of the church from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Skírnismál almost certainly concluded in the union of the god of fertility and a jötunn's daughter whose name might be linked to earth or a field.³⁸ It also contains a seemingly genuine curse which Skírnir bestows on Gerðr, accompanied by the carving of runes (st. 36). Indeed, that the runes in question were still seen as being effective in the fourteenth century has been illustrated by a rune stick found in Bergen.³⁹ There can be little doubt that audiences during the thirteenth century would have recognised the potency in Skírnir's words, and even more so if the carving of the runes was actually carried out or mimed. Also worth noting is the prayer-like quality of st. 34 which is composed in the magically associated metre known as *galdravís*.

lag, and has echoes of ritualistic prayers to the four points of the compass, like those used by the Native American Indian tribes:

Hear jötunn,
hear frost-giants,
you sons of Suttungr,
you ranks of the Æsir gods,
how I forbid,
how I ban,
the maid from loving men,
the maid from enjoying men!
[Heyri iötnar,
heyri hrímpursar,
synir Suttunga,
síalfir áslíðar,
hvé ek fyrirbyð,
hvé ek fyrirbanna,
manna glaum mani,
manna nyt mani!]

It is one thing to read such ritualistic, seemingly genuine pagan words. It is another to imagine them being spoken aloud even by a static solo performer. Presented as a play, with accompanying action, an audience would be observing elements that resemble, and seem to stem from some kind of living ritual. If this is added to a setting involving sites where the static gods "live", a possibly holy mound,⁴⁰ and a fire which the central character leaps over in a manner resembling many Germanic folk traditions related to fertility, one is forced to ask oneself whether such a play is likely to be a thirteenth century creation? Why should a twelfth or thirteenth century writer or performer deliberately attempt to recreate such a ritualistic and potent pagan dramatic performance in a Christian world when other safer religious or secular material existed?

Erik Noreen demonstrated long ago that in theory the text of *Skírnismál* could have existed in its present form prior to 700.⁴¹ Bearing this in mind, it is worth considering whether a ritual like that under discussion could have existed in pagan times, and later become transformed into an acted "folk

game" or "folk drama" in medieval folk tradition.

There is unfortunately too little space to go into this subject in much detail here. It is noticeable, however, that the action of *Skírnismál* seems to take place during a winter night: Skírnir is woken at the start, and when he leaves he talks of how "it is dark outside" above "misty mountains" (st. 10). Freyr similarly stresses that "(one) night is long" ("lóng er nótt": st. 42). Neither of these last two statements would apply to a normal Scandinavian summer. This time setting brings to mind the term "Frey's leikr" ("The play of Freyr"/ "Freyr's game") which is placed in direct relation to Yuletide by the ninth-century Norwegian skald Þorbjörn hornklofi in his poem *Haraldskvæði* (st. 3). The meaning of this expression is disputed, but several scholars have suggested that Þorbjörn might originally have meant an outdoor ritual game associated with the Yuletide festival.⁴²

The possibility of the existence of such a winter ritual connected to Freyr brings to mind the saga account of Gunnarr helmingr who was said to have fought with a living statue of the god Freyr, before taking on the role and guise of the god, and accompanying Freyr's priestess wife on a winter procession across the mountains of Sweden "to bring fertility to the crops" ("að gera mönnum árbót").⁴³ This account has certain parallels in classical literature.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, the idea that such forms of dramatic sacred marriage *did* form part of early pagan ritual in Sweden finds support in the visual evidence of the Bronze Age petroglyphs from Bohuslän and elsewhere in south-west Sweden.⁴⁵ Several scholars have also argued that a similar practice might lie behind Saxo Grammaticus' account (c. 1200) of effeminate dancing mimes at the Uppsala festival of Freyr.⁴⁶

The use of costumes and masks as part of ritual activities in pagan Scandinavia is suggested by the evidence of the Bohuslän petroglyphs, the Torslunda helmet plate matrices (which depict a man in animal costume), the Oseberg tapestry (which seems to

show both men and women in animal costumes), and the animal masks recently found in the harbour at Haithabu in Schleswig.⁴⁷ There is also good reason for assuming that these costumed traditions did not wholly die out, but in many cases became transformed into forms of elementary folk drama in Scandinavia. Indeed, most Scandinavian activities of this kind seem to centre around the time of the winter solstice. Of particular interest are the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century figures like the straw-covered *Halm-Staffan* and *skelers* encountered in Sweden and Shetland,⁴⁸ the *julebuk* and *julegeit* (Yule-goat) that used to appear throughout Scandinavia,⁴⁹ the skin and/or seaweed disguised figures of *Gryla* and the *jóluestur* ("Christmas horse") found in the Faroe Islands,⁵⁰ and other ragged figures like *Háa-Póra* ("Tall-Póra"), the so-called *þingálpn* and the *hestur* ("horse") which used to regularly appear in the later *vikivaki* games in Iceland.⁵¹ One also notes the numerous Scandinavian folk games involving the element of wooing or a "mock-wedding", many of which are again associated with the Christmas period.⁵²

In very general terms, there is reason to believe that some form of ritually-rooted popular drama must have existed in Scandinavia at the time that the Eddic poems came to be recorded, just as it existed in other countries in Europe. Such a tradition would provide a very general context for early dramatic performances of the dialogic poems of the Edda.

The strongest evidence for such performances, however, is in the poems themselves. Whatever their origin, and whatever their context, there seems to be little doubt that they were not only regarded by the thirteenth-century scribes as being dramas of some kind, but that they were also presented as such. In their manuscript form, they might be considered the earliest recorded popular dramas in northern Europe. In performance, they grant us a unique insight into a form of very early folk drama that was still on the borderline of ancient dramatic ritual.

NOTES

- 1 This article is a shortened and translated version of "Skírnisleikur og Freysmál", an article published in Icelandic in *Skírnir*, 167, 1993, pp. 421–459. It represents a very broad summary of certain points contained in a book to be published by Boydell and Brewer this year, under the title of *The origins of drama in Scandinavia*. I would like to express my gratitude to the Science Council of Iceland for the grant that provided me with the time to work on both the book and these articles, and also to the numerous people who have aided me in this project. All the translations included in the text are my own.
- 2 Finnur Magnússon (as Finn Magnúsen) *Den Ældre Edda* (4 vols) Copenhagen 1821–1823, II, p. 173, note **; cf. also pp. 134–136.
- 3 Philipotts, Bertha *The Elder Edda and ancient Scandinavian drama*, Cambridge, 1920.
- 4 Cf. Harrison, Jane *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (2nd ed.) London 1963, pp. 343–344.
- 5 Sveinn Einarsson *Íslensk teiklist*, I, Reykjavík 1991, pp. 39–63.
- 6 *Ibid.* p. 61.
- 7 Cf. Harris, Joseph "Eddic poetry as oral poetry: the evidence of parallel passages in the Helgi poems for questions of composition and performance" in *Edda: a collection of essays* by R. J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason (eds), Manotoba 1983, pp. 210–235.
- 8 See also sts 8–9, sts 17–18; and sts 39 and 41.
- 9 See further close parallels in wording in st. 16 and st. 24; and st. 29 and st. 36.
- 10 "En text som skall framföras muntligt måste vara lätt att uppfatta och överblicka. Publiken har inte den möjlighet som en läsare har att gå tillbaka i texten efter behag, långsamt analysera meningarna, i lugn og ro analysera betydelsen", Lönnroth, Lars *Den dubbla scenen: muntlig dikning från Eddan till Abba*, Stockholm 1978, pp. 12–13.
- 11 Brennan, Malcolm *Babio* (ed. and trans. into English) Citadel monograph series 7, Charleston S. Carolina 1968, pp. 9–31; Axton, Richard *European Drama of the Early Middle Ages*, London 1974, pp. 21–23; Dronke, Peter "Narrative and dialogue in medieval secular drama" in Peiro Bottani and Anna
- 12 Torti (eds) *Literature in fourteenth-century England*, Cambridge 1983, pp. 99–120; Moore, Bruce "The narrator within the performance: problems with two medieval 'plays'", *Comparative drama*, 22, 1988, pp. 21–36.
- 13 Gunnell, Terence A. "The concept of ancient Scandinavian drama – a reevaluation", unpublished doctoral dissertation, the University of Leeds 1991, pp. 227–240 and 268–275; cf. Jón Helgason "Norges og Islands digtning", in Sigurðr Nordal (ed.) *Nordisk kultur, VIII: Literaturhistorie*, (2 vols: A and B) Stockholm 1942–1953, B, pp. 35.
- 14 Cf. Heusler, Andreas Introduction to *The Codex Regius of the Elder Edda*, MS no. 2365 4^{to} in the old Royal collection of the Royal Library of Copenhagen Corpus codicum Islandicorum medii aevi, X, Copenhagen 1937, p. 19; Finnur Jónsson "Eddadigtenes samling", *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 42, 1926, p. 229; Jónas Kristjánsson *Eddas and sagas: Iceland's medieval literature*, trans. Peter Foote, Reykjavík 1988, p. 49.
- 15 Philipotts op. cit. p. 103.
- 16 Wessén, Elias "Den islandska eddadiktningen. Dess uppteckning och redigering", *Saga og sed*, 1946, p. 19.
- 17 Cf. Dronke, Ursula "Art and tradition in Skírnismál", in Norman Davis and C. L. Wrenn (eds) *English and medieval studies presented to J. R. R. Tolkien on the occasion of his 70th birthday*, London 1962, pp. 260–263.
- 18 Finnur Jónsson "Sigurðarsaga og de prosaiske stykker i Codex Regius", *Aarbøger for nordisk oldkyndighed og historie*, 1917, pp. 16–36; Finnur Jónsson "Eddadigtenes samling", op. cit. pp. 215–233.
- 19 Lindblad, Gustav *Studier i Codex Regius af Aldre Eddan*, Lund 1954, p. 286; Lindblad, Gustav "Poetiska Eddans förhistoria och skrivskicket i Codex regius", *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 95, 1980, pp. 159 and 162.
- 20 Cf. Philipotts op. cit. pp. 102–103.
- 21 To give one example: Snorri writes "Freyr had gone into Hliðskjálf and seen across all the worlds" ("Freyr hafði gengit i Hliðskjálf ok sá of heima alla"). The prose introduction reads "Freyr ... had sat in Hliðskjálf and seen over all the worlds" ("Freyr ... hafði setz i Hliðskjálf ok sá um heima alla"). The poem itself makes no mention of where Freyr first

- set eyes on Gerðr. Snorri Sturluson *Edda* Ed. Finnur Jónsson, (2nd ed.) København, 1926. Lindblad, Gustav "Centrala eddaproblem i 1970-talets forskningsläge", *Scripta Islandica; Islandska sällskapets årsbok*, 28, 1977, pp. 14–20.
- 22 Cf. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson *Islenzkar bókmenntir í forn öld* (1 vol. printed), Reykjavík 1962, p. 188; Jón Helgason (ed.) *Guðedigte* (3rd ed.), *Eddadigte*, in Nordisk filologi, serie A: tekster (3 vols), II. Oslo 1971, p. x; Gunnell op. cit. pp. 207–209.
- 23 Jón Helgason *Guðadigte*, II, op. cit. p. x.
- 24 Cf. Wimmer, Ludvig and Finnur Jónsson (eds.) *Hånd-skriften nr. 2365 4^{to} gl.kgl.saml.* (Codex Regius af den Ældre Edda) i fotografisk og diplomatisk gengivelse, København 1891; Heusler, op. cit.; Finnur Jónsson (ed.) *Håndskriften nr. 748, 4^{to}, bl. 1–6*, i den *Arnarnagæanske samling* (*Brudstykke af den Ældre Edda*) i fotografisk og diplomatisk gengivelse, København 1896; Wessén, Elias (ed.) *Fragments of the Elder and the Younger Edda* AM 748 I and II 4^o, Corpus codicum Islandicorum medii aevi, XVII, Copenhagen 1945.
- 25 Photographs of all the manuscripts under discussion in the following section are contained in my *The origins of drama in Scandinavia* (forthcoming). Some of these manuscripts are also depicted in another article in Icelandic: Gunnell, Terry "Spásíukrot", *Skáldskaparmál*, 3, 1994, pp. 7–29, which discusses this subject in more detail.
- 26 I.e. "Scirn q." ("Skirnir said/ chanted") before Skirnir's first speech (st. 2), "Sc.mt.v.hesin" ("Skirnir said to the horse") before the speech to the horse (st. 10), and "Ambót q." ("The servant said/ chanted") before the servant's speech to Gerðr (st. 15).
- 27 The only exceptions are, logically, "Gerðr q." ("Gerðr said/ chanted") and "Ambát q." ("The servant said/ chanted") before sts 14 and 15.
- 28 See Jón Helgason (ed.) *The Arnarnagæne manuscript 674 A4*, Manuscripta Islandica, IV, Copenhagen 1957, and Jón Helgason (ed.) *Hauksbók: the Arnarnagæne manuscript 371, 4^{to}, 544, 4^{to}, and 675, 4^{to}*, Manuscripta Islandica, V, Copenhagen 1960.
- 29 See Seip, Didrik Arup (ed.) *The Arna-Magnæan manuscript 677, 4^{to}*, Corpus codicum Islandicorum medii aevi, XVIII, Copenhagen 1949.
- 30 See Holm-Olsen, Ludvig (ed.) *Konungs skuggsjá, Speculum regale, de norske håndskrifter i jaksimile*, introduced by Ludvig Holm-Olsen. Festgave fra Universitet i Oslo til H.M. Kong Haakon VII, Oslo 1947.
- 31 Dronke, op. cit. pp. 105–105; Dronke, Peter *Poetic individuality in the Middle Ages - new departures in poetry 1000–1150*, (2nd ed., rev.) Westfield publications in medieval studies, I, London 1986, pp. 66–75.
- 32 The most obvious parallels here are certain MSS of the Latin comedy *Babio* from the late thirteenth/ early fourteenth century, see Keith Bate (ed.) *Three Latin comedies*, Toronto medieval studies, Toronto 1976; the Anglo-Norman passion play, *La seinte resurreccion*, from the late thirteenth century; the Anglo-Norman religious drama, *Le mystère d'Adam* from the middle of the twelfth century; and the Middle English religious play, *The harrowing of Hell* from the early fourteenth century. In these MSS, the speaker indications are placed in the margins in a very similar fashion to that used in the *Codex Regius* and AM 748 MSS. See Gunnell "Spásíukrot", passim.
- 33 Olnik, Axel "Episke lov i folkedigtningen", *Danske Studier*, 1908, pp. 70–71.
- 34 Cf. Philipotts op. cit. pp. 176–179.
- 35 Cf. Tydeman, William *The theatre in the middle ages: Western European stage conditions, c.800–1576*, Cambridge 1978, pp. 57–63, 67–70, 144–157.
- 36 Cf. Kolve, V.A. *The play called Corpus Christi*, London 1966, p. 23.
- 37 A number of Folkloristics students at the University of Iceland recently staged an outdoor performance of *Skírnismál*, in association with the Félag Ásatrúanna, and under the direction of the present author. The presentation took place on the evening of 21 December 1992 amid burning torchlight in a snow-covered beer-garden behind the restaurant, Hressingaskálinn, in Reykjavík. It demonstrated beyond all doubt that *Skírnismál* is well-suited to the medieval form of stage production described above.
- 38 Cf. Olsen, Magnus "Fra gammel norsk myte og kultus", *Maal og minne*, 1909, p. 22; and
- 39 Dronke, Ursula op. cit. pp. 253–254. Liestøl, Aslak "Runer fra Bryggen", *Viking*, 27, 1963, pp. 41–42.
- 40 Cf. Olnik, Axel and Ellekilde, Hans *Nordens gudeverden* (2 vols), København 1926–1951, I, pp. 242–249, pp. 500–512.
- 41 Noreen, Erik "Eddastudier", *Uppsala universitets årskrift, filosofi, språkvetenskap och historiska vetenskaper*, 5, 1921, pp. 2–18. See, for example, Grundtvig, Nikolai Fred. Sev. *Nordens mytologi, eller sind billed-sprog* (3rd ed.), København 1870, p. 430; Celander, Hilding *Förkristen jul enligt norröna källor*. Göteborgs Universitets årskrift, 61:3, 1955, p. 11.
- 42 Celander, Hilding *Förkristen jul enligt norröna källor*, 3 vols. (Guðbrandur Vigfússon and C.R. Unger, eds) Det norske historiske kildeskriftfonds skrifter, 4, Christiania 1860, I, pp. 332–339; *Íslensk fornrit* IX, Reykjavík 1956, pp. 109–115.
- 43 Jónas Kristjánsson (ed.), *Ógmundar þáttur dýts*, in *Íslensk fornrit*, IX, Reykjavík 1956, pp. LV–LXIV.
- 44 Cf. Almgren, Oscar *Háallristningar och kultbruk*, Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademiens handlingar, 35. Stockholm 1926–1927, pp. 116–119.
- 45 Saxo Grammaticus, Book 6: *Saxonis gesta Danorum*, (J. Olnik and H. Ræder, eds),
- Haunja 1931, p. 154; cf. Holtsmark, Anne "Drama", *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder* (22 vols). (Magnús Mór Lárusson, Jakob Benediktsson et al. eds) Reykjavík 1956–1978, III, 1958, p. 293; Davidson, H. R. Ellis *Gods and myths of Northern Europe*, Harmondsworth 1964, pp. 96–97.
- 47 Gunnell, Terence A. 1991. "The concept of ancient Scandinavian drama – a reevaluation", op. cit. pp. 64–161.
- 48 Celander op. cit. p. 274; Gunnell, Terry "Grýla, grýlur, grøleks and skelers: Folk drama in the North Atlantic in the early Middle Ages", in *Samfidsarsögur* (The contemporary sagas), Niunda alþjóðlega forn-sagnþingid, forþrent, Reykjavík 1994, pp. 267–271.
- 49 Weiser-Aall, Lucy *Julenissen og julegeita i Norge*, Småskrifter fra norsk etnologisk granskning, Oslo 1954.
- 50 Gunnell "Grýla, grýlur, grøleks and skelers: Folk drama in the North Atlantic in the early Middle Ages", op. cit. pp. 264–271.
- 51 Einarsson op. cit. 65–118.
- 52 Gunnell "The concept of ancient Scandinavian drama – a reevaluation", op. cit. pp. 150–157.

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Expanding Horizons

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Front Page:
The story-teller Kokontei Shincho II of the Rakugo theatre. Photo by Yoji Yokoi.
See last page for information on subscription

Preface

The discipline of theatre studies in the Nordic countries is expanding its fields of interest far beyond the immediate space and time. For a long time the main focus was, naturally enough, on nearby phenomena, and this is where it is likely to remain. Additionally, however, we are now looking further away. Initially, the outward movement embraced international theories and methods in order to apply them in work on domestic issues. Now the movement is also to make a contribution to the international field of theatre studies.

Time and time again we return to the intriguing question of the origins of theatre and more specifically to the issue of early theatre in the Nordic countries. As long as our definitions of theatre were closely connected to our own immediate contemporary forms of theatre, the introduction of theatre was considered to have occurred in the late Middle Ages. But with expanding theatre definitions the time scope expands too.

The two articles below on Icelandic material bring (the theatrical nature of) well-known texts into focus again. Sveinn Einarsón presents a thorough analysis of a longstanding scholarly debate, and puts forward the proposition that theatre in Iceland and mainland Scandinavia emerged from the dance. Terry Gunnell discusses the oral transmission of one particular text, for the most part arranged as a dialogue, and, working from the perception of an audience, he convincingly concludes that the text could have been followed and understood only when delivered by several performers. Then it is a theatre performance we are dealing with. Thanks to meticulous work, based on thorough analyses of extant material, these two articles advance our knowledge about our own early theatre history.

Anne Lande, too, ventures into the borderland between oral story-telling and theatre, but in a very different cultural context – Japan. For some time the Nordic countries have been developing an interest in Asian theatre, but, as in the West generally, this has focused on theatre arts like the Noh, Kabuki and, of late, Shingeki, whereas the story-telling performances of the Rakugo have attracted scant attention, even from Japanese scholars, maybe because it is part of the popular culture. As Anne Lande concludes, however, it is the popular expectations which have created a basic openness between performer and audience, a condition which has helped the art constantly to adapt to new circumstances and thus to survive.

The borderland between theatre and story-telling is also an important one in many African cultures, where story-telling is a widespread phenomenon with many different functions. That some story-telling traditions also embrace the art of acting is a fact nowadays accepted both by most theatre scholars and by most literary scholars. This acceptance lays the way open for studies of story-telling traditions as a genesis of parts of the modern theatre in for instance Ghana. When Gavivina Tamakloe, in his article on early Ghanaian theatre, expresses mild criticism of some scholars, it is, among other things, because early scholars of African theatre overlooked the possibility to expand their horizons and look for theatre arts outside those areas where theatre was found in Western contexts. An extensive history of the theatres of each nation-state of Africa still remains to be written, but Tamakloe's article is a step in that direction.

South-American theatres have not captured the attention of many critics, and very

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