

‘How Can His Word Be Trusted?’:  
Speaker and Authority in Old Norse  
Wisdom Poetry

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This dissertation is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

## Declarations

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated in the text.

The dissertation does not exceed the regulation length, including footnotes and references, but excluding the bibliography.

This dissertation is written in conformance with the ASNC style-sheet.

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ABSTRACT

In the eddic poem *Hávamál*, the god Óðinn gives advice, including a warning about the fickleness of human, and divine, nature. He cites his own flagrant deception of giants who trusted him in order to win the mead of poetry as evidence for this deep-seated capacity for deceit, asking of himself: ‘how can his word be trusted?’ This is an intriguing question to ask in a poem purporting to relate the wisdom of Óðinn, and it is a concern repeatedly voiced in regard to him and other speakers in the elaborate narrative frames of the Old Norse wisdom poems. The exchange of wisdom in poetic texts such as this is no simple matter. Wisdom is conceived of as a body of knowledge, experience and observation that binds together all aspects of human life, the natural world and the supernatural realms. But its application depended heavily on the way in which it was passed on and interpreted. This dissertation examines the ways that these poems reflect on the interpretation and value of their own contents as a function of the particular speaker and circumstances of each wisdom exchange.

The texts which form the foundation of this enquiry are the so-called eddic poems: alliterative verses largely preserved within a single manuscript of the thirteenth century, though many are arguably of much earlier date. About a dozen of the surviving poems might be classed, however tentatively, as concerning wisdom, though the route to this classification is not straightforward. Definition of this corpus, and of the genre of wisdom literature more widely, is thus the principal aim of the introductory Chapter I, while Chapter II expands on the question of material and methodology by scrutinizing the idea of wisdom in general within Old Norse. Crucial here is an examination of the terms used for wisdom and associated concepts, which suggest an antagonistic view of how knowledge might pass from one person to another. Close readings of the text and sensitivity to the manuscript context of each poem, as well as consideration of the significance of their potential oral prehistory and awareness of comparable literatures from other contexts, are established here as the dominant mode of analysis. Observations derived from the interpretation of comparable literatures also inform my approach.

With a grounding in wisdom literature more generally and with the salient concepts relating to knowledge transfer thus established, I go on to examine specific points and groups within the body of eddic wisdom poetry which shed light on the evolving interpretation of wisdom exchange. An important case-study analyzed in this way in Chapter III is perhaps the most complex: *Hávamál* itself, a famous but notoriously problematic text probably reflecting multiple layers of composition. It is at the heart of the question of how mankind relates to supernatural beings – a relationship which could be particularly fraught where the transmission of wisdom occurred. Thus this chapter also contains analysis of terminology for men, gods and other supernatural beings which sheds light on the relationships between the human and the divine. Chapter IV expands on these issues to consider three paradigms of mythological wisdom instruction which bridge different worlds, human and supernatural, or between different supernatural domains: poems in which Óðinn dispenses wisdom; those in which he acquires it from a contest with another living being; and those in which he acquires it from the dead through sacrifice and magical ability.

These chapters establish the ‘traditional’ form of wisdom exchange as defined through eddic verses that adopt a broadly pre- or non-Christian setting. Yet eddic verse-forms did not die out with conversion, and in some cases were exploited for new compositions written from an explicitly Christian perspective or with parodic intent. These poems, discussed in Chapter V, cast an important sidelight onto the associations of eddic verse as a medium for conveying information of complicated or questionable authority. The concluding Chapter VI then addresses questions of what we may deduce from the preceding chapters about evolving cultural attitudes towards wisdom, authority and truth in medieval Iceland.

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# I

## Introduction

This dissertation concerns the presentation of compilations of wisdom in Old Norse eddic poetry: how it was that the dozen poems one might classify, however tentatively, as wisdom poetry legitimized and put across their content. The poems include diverse scenes of interaction between men, gods and other supernatural beings, often of an antagonistic or confrontational nature, inviting the question of how audiences satisfied themselves of the answer to the speaker's own challenge: 'how can his word be trusted?'

### WISDOM AND WISDOM LITERATURE

The impulse to collect wisdom – the crystallized, condensed knowledge of life, the universe and everything employed by numerous societies to pass on and validate valued information – appears to be virtually universal. It may be seen everywhere from modern popular music such as 'Everybody's Free (to Wear Sunscreen)' to cuneiform inscriptions from ancient Mesopotamia.<sup>1</sup> Such a broad phenomenon naturally entails a near infinite array of content, setting the world into as many different frames as there have been purveyors of wisdom. In itself the content of wisdom can shed light on a culture, but just as important is what lent the sources of wisdom their authority. The incarnations of wisdom texts are as diverse as their contents, and there is of course no set form for the laying out of 'wisdom' which encompasses all cultures and literatures. As the distilled advice of a particular society, the presentation of wisdom – be it as agonistic discourse, authoritative monologue or mysterious revelation – was naturally shaped by the society in which it developed. In other words, studying the means of legitimizing wisdom in a culture provides as revealing an insight into its values and world-view as the subject matter of the wisdom itself.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Everybody's Free (to Wear Sunscreen)', Baz Luhrmann (EMI), released 9 March 1999. The eponymous advice – and the rest of the lyrics – had first been printed in the *Chicago Tribune*, 1 June 1997, originally written by Mary Schmich. Mesopotamian material is discussed at a later point in this chapter.

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Despite being widespread, wisdom literature is a difficult genre for modern audiences to appreciate. This is not simply a matter of antiquity, since other genres and literatures have enjoyed more long-lasting popularity. Indeed, some of the literature surviving from early medieval Europe has enjoyed continued popularity with both readers and critics.<sup>2</sup> It is not hard to understand the appeal of the morally ambiguous heroics of *Beowulf* or the bleak realism of the *Íslendingasögur*, of which Ted Hughes wrote that ‘the subsequent seven centuries have produced no other work so timelessly up-to-date, nothing with such a supreme, undistorted sense of actuality, nothing so tempered and tested by such a formidable seriousness of life’.<sup>3</sup> These works owe their success in modern times above all to the universal nature of their concerns, but also to a coincidental conformity to modern tastes and ideals. Yet there is always a danger, when reading such texts, in assuming that the features that we find most congenial now would have also been the focus of the authors who composed them and the audiences for which they were originally intended. Changing ideals, institutions and cultural conditions inescapably hold many works at some remove from modern understanding. Though now read more as fiction than history, Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *De gestis Britonum* was extremely popular and widely relied upon down to and after the sixteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Saints’ lives too appear to have been read and accepted much more widely in the medieval period than they are today. The most popular saints’ lives – such as those of St Cuthbert, St Martin and St Anthony – exist in a great many manuscript copies produced over a long period of time and across a large geographical area.<sup>5</sup> This large sample of saints’ lives has the advantage of allowing informed discussion of questions of genre and taste. It is also helpful that the institution largely responsible for the cultivation and transmission of this kind of literature, the medieval Christian church, is relatively well evidenced and understood.

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<sup>2</sup> Although it can be difficult to judge, there is even reason to think that some works are more popular today than they ever were in the Middle Ages. *Beowulf*, for example, is the most famous piece of Old English literature by far, but only survives in one late and not particularly high-grade manuscript (London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. XV). For selected discussion of the reception of *Beowulf*, see Lerer, ‘Contemporary Critical Theory’; and Osborn, ‘Translations, Versions, Illustrations’.

<sup>3</sup> Dustjacket comment for *Sagas of Icelanders*, gen. ed. Örnólfur Thorsson.

<sup>4</sup> In spite of more than a few critics over the centuries, there is evidence that Geoffrey’s work was generally taken at face value: Ullman, ‘Influence of Geoffrey of Monmouth’; and Reeve, ‘Transmission’.

<sup>5</sup> For a recent overview of the whole genre, see Philippart, *Hagiographies*.

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Other types of literature, however, remain difficult to access, as they are not products of well-documented social institutions, circumstances or milieux,<sup>6</sup> and do not correspond closely with any popular modern genre. Literature with a primarily instructive function comprises one such category that is particularly common in the medieval period. Didactic texts and works of outmoded learning are some of the most obvious victims of the passage of time. Rather than resist their natural sympathies, readers of these texts must engineer a somewhat artificial sympathy by trying to imagine the original conditions which might have rendered the material more meaningful: what original audiences valued in it, and why they did so. The potential danger for distortion this process creates is possibly just as great as that inherent in analysing more popular texts. In order to consider their purpose and aesthetics we must assume that they achieved what they set out to, and this is not too great an assumption to make about some texts. But without information about the original purpose and audience of didactic literature it is difficult to make sense of, appreciate, or establish a theoretical framework for its interpretation based on its contemporary context. Again, we can come closest to understanding, if not always appreciating, works when they represent a product of the relatively well-attested tradition of Latin learning. Thus the purpose of grammars is, on the whole, relatively well understood, although they contain much that is by modern standards obscure, irrelevant and even false.<sup>7</sup> Yet within this category there remain some works that are still more difficult to account for, such as the *Epistulae* and *Epitomae* of Virgilius Maro Grammaticus.<sup>8</sup> Virgilius's work – now usually identified as a product of Ireland in the middle of the seventh century – is so outlandish that it fails to fit comfortably into the medieval grammatical genre as it is understood, and consequently has been read by various critics as clever satire, incompetent scholarship or even heretical critique.<sup>9</sup>

Vivien Law classified Virgilius's writings as 'wisdom literature'. This genre of didactic literature is generally considered to be outmoded, and has attracted widely diverging scholarly judgement.<sup>10</sup> Commonly highlighted features of wisdom literature

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<sup>6</sup> The difficulty this produces is evident from the number of hypotheses put forward that seek to identify the social institutions behind *Beowulf*, and these have produced a number of disparate and mutually contradictory readings of the poem. See Wormald, 'Bede, *Beowulf* and the Conversion'; Whitelock, *Audience of Beowulf*; and Chase, *Dating of Beowulf*.

<sup>7</sup> See Holtz, *Donat et la tradition*; and Kaster, *Guardians of Language*.

<sup>8</sup> *Epitomi ed Epistole*, ed. and transl. Polara and Caruso.

<sup>9</sup> See in particular Law, *Wisdom, Authority and Grammar*; and Herren, 'Some New Light'.

<sup>10</sup> Law, *Wisdom, Authority and Grammar*, pp. 22–46.

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include a general tendency towards didactic tone and proverbial content, and the presentation of an ordered world-view that could embrace elements of society, nature, the world and morality in a single whole. This broad description papers over the huge diversity in form and subject matter that makes wisdom literature intrinsically very hard to define, much less characterize and fully understand. The concept of wisdom literature as a single, distinct genre originates in Hebrew scholarship on the biblical books of wisdom<sup>11</sup> – which in themselves had a deep impact on medieval conceptions of wisdom – and has since been applied to a large body of material across a great number of early cultures which was felt by various scholars to be somehow analogous to it. But even within Hebrew scholarship, the effort to define wisdom literature specifically has been something of an ‘elusive quest’.<sup>12</sup> The difficulties are only compounded when definitions of wisdom derived from the extant corpora of wisdom literature are compared across societies, as it becomes apparent that wisdom can carry quite different connotations in various cultural contexts.

This was evident to Wilfred Lambert in his 1960 study of Babylonian wisdom literature, in which he observed that while the emphasis of Hebrew wisdom literature is frequently on ‘pious living’, Babylonian texts have little moral content and are more concerned with skill in cult and magic lore.<sup>13</sup> Yet the continued use of the term ‘wisdom literature’ is defended by more recent scholars like Roland Murphy, who argues that for all that it is a ‘term of convenience’ it does provide a helpful way of characterizing literature primarily concerned with wisdom because ‘certain genres and themes are common to these works and so give a semblance of unity to them’.<sup>14</sup> Broadly speaking, this coincidental similarity between the literature of related and unrelated cultures has been clearly accounted for by anthropologists and other students of oral cultures.<sup>15</sup> Knowledge had to be passed on from person to person, to be learned and respected through long usage: similar strategies for doing so could naturally evolve independently. Walter Ong writes that ‘human beings in primarily oral cultures ... do not study [but] ... learn by apprenticeship, by listening, by repeating what they hear, by mastering proverbs and ways of combining and recombining them, by assimilating other formulary materials, by participating in a

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<sup>11</sup> Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Crenshaw, ‘Wisdom Literature’, p. 369.

<sup>13</sup> Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Murphy, *Wisdom Literature*, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Harris, ‘Eddic Poetry’, pp. 111–26.

kind of corporate retrospection'.<sup>16</sup> Transmission of knowledge in this way did not of course leave written traces until brought into contact with a literary culture. Old Norse wisdom poetry is one of many genres which emerge during a transitional period between oral and written tradition. Oral composition and transmission, as well as a fluid and vibrant textual culture, appear to have left important imprints on the presentation, content and preservation of the texts, as I shall explore in more detail in Chapter VI.

Beyond the impact of an often oral background, however, it has proven impossible to offer a clear definition of wisdom poetry that is both meaningfully specific and broad enough to include all examples felt to belong to the genre. There exists considerable variety in both the form and in the content of such literature, creating a chain of overlap that connects some very diverse texts that often have more in common with works normally assigned to other genres than with each other. The underlying difficulty is that while wisdom literature may be, broadly speaking, the product of a particular stage of any culture's development, individual works of literature cannot be divorced from their specific cultural context.<sup>17</sup> The extent to which wisdom literature may even be said to exist as a separate and distinct genre varies between cultures, just as the overlap in form and content between wisdom literature and works of other related genres can also vary. As wisdom literature often occurs within a single tradition both in prose and verse forms, this range can be quite vast. It is necessary, therefore, to define wisdom literature with particular reference to the literary tradition of the culture that produced it, as is done in the specific case of medieval Scandinavia (and especially Iceland) in Chapters II and VI.<sup>18</sup> While these definitions across cultures may resemble each other closely enough to warrant speaking of a broader phenomenon of 'wisdom literature' – that is a number of works and genres that appear to serve a similar function across cultures – it does not follow that a wisdom genre as such exists within all of these literary traditions.

This is not to argue that the wisdom literature of a given culture must be read in isolation. Indeed, this is a luxury that the sparse literary survivals of most early societies do not afford. Comparisons between unrelated cultures may illuminate common human ways of reacting to circumstances now foreign to modern readers,

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<sup>16</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 34.

<sup>17</sup> See Foley's discussion of what he terms 'genre dependence' and 'tradition dependence' (*Oral-Formulaic Theory*, pp. 68–71).

<sup>18</sup> White, 'Proverbs and Cultural Models', p. 170.

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while comparisons between related cultures may reveal the direct influence of one upon another, complicating the impression of a single, continuous tradition, or they may cast light upon a shared past from which each divergently evolved. Thus Old English wisdom literature, for example, reveals the expected mix of native traditional elements with tropes and forms more characteristic of biblical and Latin wisdom literature, with which the Anglo-Saxons are known to have been well acquainted.<sup>19</sup> Some Old English works also share features with Old Norse wisdom poetry,<sup>20</sup> and could be viewed as evidence of a common prehistory from which both traditions ultimately derive. Old Norse wisdom literature must also be viewed, like the Old English material, within the context of imported Latin learning as well as within the context of the whole body of vernacular material surviving from medieval Scandinavia and, to a lesser extent, the cognate literature of Anglo-Saxon England and other parts of medieval Europe.

The central concern of my dissertation is with the framing of a particular branch of this tradition: that which is preserved in manuscripts from medieval Iceland, cast in eddic verse as the discourse of men and supernatural beings. This poetry drew on several influences, oral and literate, secular and religious, Christian and pagan. How and why it did so, and emerged in the form it did, is my principal enquiry: what can the ways in which wisdom was presented in the eddic poetry of medieval Scandinavia tell us about concepts of authority and knowing in that society, and how can the many expressions of wisdom in the eddic mode illuminate the genre and the literary history of medieval Iceland?

### SCHOLARSHIP AND DEFINITION OF CORPUS

A necessary preliminary to my study is the background of eddic poetry itself. Eddic verse as a whole is principally defined in two ways: as poetry that is described in contrast to skaldic verse; and as the poetry contained in, or closely related to, a small

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<sup>19</sup> Their knowledge of this tradition would have derived primarily from the biblical books of wisdom and associated commentaries, the *Disticha Catonis* (which were also translated into Old English in the late tenth century: Cox, 'Old English *Dicts*') and (certainly in later Anglo-Saxon England) the philosophy of Boethius's *De consolazione philosophiae*. For background see Bullough, 'Educational Tradition'; Ashurst, 'Old English Wisdom Poetry'; and Godden and Irvine, *Old English Boethius I*, 207–15.

<sup>20</sup> See Larrington's comparison of the two traditions in *Store of Common Sense*, esp. pp. 200–19.

number of manuscript anthologies. Much of skaldic poetry survives in manuscripts containing prose texts and occurs within the texts as quotation, rather than in collected anthologies,<sup>21</sup> certain features unify it in contrast to eddic poetry, and it is not at all clear what the relationship between the two verse forms may have been historically.<sup>22</sup> Their interaction in the poetry as it survives is complex; a point I will return to in Chapter VI. Generally speaking skaldic poems refer to the real world, however imaginative the terms in which they describe it: their content is human characters and their concerns, and the identity of the poets – as well as their relationship to their subject matter – is normally known.<sup>23</sup> The most significant characteristic features of this type of poetry are adherence to a strict and elaborate metrical system,<sup>24</sup> and the frequent use of kennings, which in eddic poetry occur as only occasional poetic ornamentation. In contrast to the skaldic tradition where poets' names were transmitted with their verse, eddic poetry is typically anonymous.<sup>25</sup> These poems are concerned with gods and heroes and prefer to adopt their voices or that of an impersonal narrator whose only role in the events he relates is as witness. In contrast to skaldic poetry, eddic poetry is cast in looser alliterative measures more similar to the metres of early west Germanic languages.<sup>26</sup>

The other pragmatic criterion for defining eddic verse is its preservation in a small number of manuscript anthologies. Surviving eddic poetry is for the most part preserved in Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, GkS 2365 4to, also known as the Codex Regius because of its former place in the Danish royal collection:<sup>27</sup> an unprepossessing manuscript written *c.* 1270 which contains about thirty eddic compositions of various genres.<sup>28</sup> It belongs to a major burst of scribal activity in Iceland in the thirteenth century; the first from which substantial numbers of

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<sup>21</sup> Whole poems are occasionally quoted, though excerpts and *lausavísur* ('single verses') are more common. For a complete list of surviving skaldic poetry from the end of the fourteenth century and before, see the Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages editing project website: [www.skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au/db.php](http://www.skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au/db.php).

<sup>22</sup> See Gade, *Structure of Old Norse Dróttkvætt*, pp. 1–3 and 226–34.

<sup>23</sup> Faulkes, *What Was Viking Poetry for?*

<sup>24</sup> For a full description, see Gade, *Structure of Old Norse Dróttkvætt*.

<sup>25</sup> An interesting exception is Gunnlaugr Leifsson's *Msp*, which, although modelled on *Vsp*, displays typical skaldic as well as eddic stylistic features (Marold, 'Merlinusspá'; for text see *Skj* BII, 10–45).

<sup>26</sup> The classic analysis of traditional Germanic verse that, with minor modifications, still remains current is Sievers, *Altgermanische Metrik*.

<sup>27</sup> For a facsimile see *Codex Regius of the Elder Edda*, ed. Heusler.

<sup>28</sup> There is a lacuna after the fourth gathering of the manuscript of 8 leaves, or about 550 lines, in the midst of the Sigurðr cycle (*ibid*, pp. 15 and 21–2; and Quinn, 'Naming of Eddic Mythological Poems', pp. 97 and 113).

manuscripts survive.<sup>29</sup> There is no doubt, however, that the Codex Regius represents a late stage in the long, complicated transmission of these poems. The classic palaeographical study by Gustav Lindblad demonstrated that the manuscript itself is based on multiple written exemplars and that the Codex Regius compiler has probably rearranged the material he drew on.<sup>30</sup> None of these preceding texts survives, and, beyond their ghosts, there is little trace of the earlier textual history of these poems. Indeed, in most cases the first stages in the history of these poems – those which preceded their committal to writing – are completely lost. Many eddic poems likely began as oral compositions, circulating between individuals in this form before being committed to writing (as discussed in Chapter VI). To pin an exact date onto the origin of these poems is in many ways therefore an artificial exercise: elements of some may have had many oral incarnations, only one of which was eventually preserved in writing. Some eddic compositions may date back to the Viking Age, and a combination of philological, contextual and comparative evidence (such as the poetic inscriptions on the Rök stone in Sweden from the ninth century) have been called on to assign a range of possible dates to various poems. Constructing any literary history of eddic poetry, therefore, must be a tentative exercise at best if one wishes to take account of all of these complicating features.<sup>31</sup>

Though very limited, there are a handful of other manuscript witnesses preserving eddic mythological poetry, and they organize their material somewhat differently. The most significant is the fragmentary anthology Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 748 I 4to,<sup>32</sup> dating from the early fourteenth century.<sup>33</sup> It contains six complete texts (*Grímnismál*, *Hymiskviða*, *Baldrs draumar*, *Skírnismál*, *Hárbarðsljóð* and *Vafþrúðnismál*) and a fragment of the prose introduction to a seventh (*Völundarkviða*).<sup>34</sup> Of these, *Baldrs draumar* is the only text not also found in the Codex Regius. Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241) too cites a wide range of eddic poems in his Prose Edda, which he quotes as the direct speech of ancient men in

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<sup>29</sup> For an overview of surviving manuscripts see Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson, ‘Manuscripts and Palaeography’, esp. pp. 249–53; and the papers in Gísli Sigurðsson and Vésteinn Ólason, *Manuscripts of Iceland*.

<sup>30</sup> Lindblad, *Studier i Codex Regius*, pp. 236–73 and ‘Poetiska Eddans förhistoria’.

<sup>31</sup> See Fidjestøl, *Dating of Eddic Poetry*.

<sup>32</sup> Hereafter AM 748 I 4to.

<sup>33</sup> See Wessén, *Fragments*. Surveys of preservation include Harris, ‘Eddic Poetry’, pp. 68–9; Gunnell, ‘Eddic Poetry’, pp. 82–3; and Clunies Ross, *History of Old Norse Poetry*, pp. 6–13.

<sup>34</sup> While I will cite eddic texts from Neckel and Kuhn’s fifth edition, I will use the common way of spelling their titles rather than the edition’s (e.g. *Vafþrúðnismál* as opposed to *Vafðrúðnismál*).

*Gylfaginning*,<sup>35</sup> and the majority of the stanzas he includes exist in some version in the Codex Regius.<sup>36</sup> Snorri was writing before the Codex Regius was produced,<sup>37</sup> and appears to have known slightly more eddic poetry than he chose to quote *in extenso*, but it is difficult to know how much more; certainly there is some eddic material preserved only as quotations within his works.<sup>38</sup> This corpus is supplemented by a handful of poems that survive in isolated contexts. The complete poem *Hyndluljóð*, for example, which Snorri quotes from as *Völuspá in skamma*, occurs only in Flateyjarbók and a second complete text of *Völuspá* is preserved in Hauksbók.<sup>39</sup>

While one might wish to imagine that the surviving corpus of mythological poetry represents only a small fragment of what once circulated – and this may well be so – the manuscript evidence indicates that if such a large corpus had ever existed, it had significantly dwindled by the thirteenth century in Iceland. The quotations in sagas – especially in the *fornaldarsögur* – seem to bear witness to a much larger corpus of heroic poetry, however.<sup>40</sup> So, for all that these manuscripts do to an extent represent independent sources, they share much of the same material, and their usefulness in delineating the limits of the tradition is restricted by their chronological and geographical proximity.<sup>41</sup>

Since the rediscovery in southern Iceland in 1643 of the medieval anthology of eddic poetry which, when presented to the king of Denmark, became known as the Codex Regius, eddic poetry has been the subject of cultural interest and, within the last two centuries, intense scholarly activity. The perspectives from which it has been approached have varied widely due to historical circumstances, as it has been caught up in various nationalistic and ideological movements. In the English-speaking world

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<sup>35</sup> On the one exception to this, see Chapter VI. He also composes several stanzas in eddic metres himself in the praise poem *Háttatal*, and his placement of these stanzas at the end of the work and within the dialogue frame of *Gylf* suggests he is aware of both a chronological and typological distinction between eddic and skaldic verse types (Faulkes, *Háttatal*, pp. xxiii–iv).

<sup>36</sup> The most important exception is the complete poem *Grottasöngur* (included only in the Codex Regius and Codex Trajectinus (Utrecht, University Library, MS 1374 (c. 1600)), within the text of *Skm*). Another complete eddic poem, *Rígsþula*, is only preserved in the Codex Wormianus manuscript of Snorri's *Edda* (Copenhagen, Arnamagnæan Collection, MS 242 (c. 1350)). See Faulkes, *Skáldskaparmál* I, xiii.

<sup>37</sup> Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North*, p. 222.

<sup>38</sup> On possible unquoted poetic sources behind Snorri's mythological prose narratives, see below Chapter II.

<sup>39</sup> Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, GkS 1005 fol.

<sup>40</sup> See, for further discussion, Clunies Ross, 'Conservation and Reinterpretation'.

<sup>41</sup> This is not to say that there were not significant differences between some of the poems preserved: The variant versions of *Vsp* are the most notable example (See Quinn, '*Völuspá*' and 'Editing the Edda').

much earlier scholarship originates from Victorian romanticism.<sup>42</sup> Related to this is the hugely productive German scholarship of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which has its roots both in serious and (for the time) cutting-edge philological analysis as well as in nationalistic and ethnic movements.<sup>43</sup> Since the Second World War, Icelanders' interest in their own medieval literary culture has become an important component of national identity.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the Codex Regius manuscript of the Poetic Edda was among the first to be returned from Denmark in 1971, and its presence in Iceland remains a symbol of reclaimed cultural identity.<sup>45</sup> In more recent times too approaches to studying eddic poetry have varied thanks to the intersection of traditionally separate disciplines. Eddic poetry is an important source for – among others – literary scholars, historical linguists, cultural historians, students of the history of religion and also archaeologists and folklorists.<sup>46</sup> It is impossible to isolate completely the study of eddic poetry to or from any of these fields, as the findings of one may have significant implications for other approaches. This is most obviously true of the dating of the composition of the poems.<sup>47</sup> This vexed question lies at the heart of the nature of this material and its value as evidence for various avenues of enquiry. At one extreme scholars would view eddic poetry as a clear window onto the Viking-Age pagan North; at the other, as a purely literary late-medieval invention so loosely related to earlier forms that it is useless as evidence for anything other than its most immediate manuscript context. The most rational position, of course, lies somewhere along this continuum, and so does most scholarship.

The most recent scholarship logically asks us to consider these texts as we find them in their manuscripts whilst acknowledging an earlier oral and written prehistory, even if that history will only ever be imperfectly understood. Our ability to

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<sup>42</sup> Wawn, *Vikings and the Victorians, Northern Antiquity*; and O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, pp. 106–201.

<sup>43</sup> Notable products of this include what remain the standard editions of both the Poetic Edda and the minor eddic texts: the first volume of Gustav Neckel's earliest edition of the *Edda* appeared in 1914 and has been revised by Hans Kuhn in several subsequent editions, most recently in 1983; and Heusler and Ranisch's *Eddica Minora* was published in 1903. The tradition of German scholarship remains strong, and is perhaps most notably manifested in recent times by the work of Klaus von See and others on the *Kommentar*.

<sup>44</sup> Gísli Pálsson, *Textual Life of Savants*, pp. 12–17.

<sup>45</sup> Gísli Sigurðsson *et al.*, “Bring the Manuscripts Home!”

<sup>46</sup> See for a selection of studies in these areas making extensive use of eddic poetry Schjødt, *Initiation between Two Worlds*; Tolley, *Shamanism*; Nordberg, *Krigarna i Odins sal*; and Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths*. Surveys of pertinent literature include Harris, ‘Eddic Poetry’; and Gunnell, ‘Eddic Poetry’.

<sup>47</sup> Surveys of proposed dates can be found in the preliminaries to each poem now covered in von See *et al.*, *Kommentar*.

understand these poems as written artefacts with oral origins has been aided by developments in the study of orality and literacy, which have periodically been brought into Old Norse scholarship and continue to provide a productive line of enquiry. The most recent scholarship is discussed in Chapter VI. The influence of New Philology is also felt in this approach,<sup>48</sup> and in Old Norse studies more generally, as scholars increasingly shift the emphasis to the surviving manuscript context of individual texts or copies of texts.<sup>49</sup>

Studies of eddic poetry can largely be separated into those focused on heroic or mythological poetry. Most scholarship on the mythological poetry, which includes the majority of the wisdom poetry, focuses on individual or small groups of poems and critical issues particular to them.<sup>50</sup> The most significant commentaries on individual poems are found in the series of *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*. While volume 3 (*Götterlieder*) includes *Alvíssmál* and volume 6 (*Heldenlieder*) includes the poems of Sigurðr's instruction, there is little discussion of wisdom poetry more generally and the volume treating the principal Odinic wisdom poems has not yet been published.<sup>51</sup> *Hávamál* has received far and away the most attention of all of the wisdom poems, and much of this is concentrated on the fascinating and extremely difficult problem of its evolution and unity. The implications of this discussion are unavoidable in any literary examination of the text, and are certainly very pertinent to the present work. They are examined below in Chapter IV.

Notable exceptions to this tendency to treat the poems separately in the context of wisdom poetry include early – and largely descriptive – work such as Jan de Vries 'Om Eddaens Visdomsdigtning'. Interest in Old English and Old Norse wisdom poetry, first treated comparatively in detail by Blanche Colton Williams in 1914,<sup>52</sup> enjoyed a major resurgence in the 1970s,<sup>53</sup> and has been the subject of

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<sup>48</sup> For selected discussion of the implications of 'New Philology' – based fundamentally on a recognition of the particularity of each text and the value of variation – for medieval and especially Old Norse texts see Busby, *Towards a Synthesis?*; Fleischman, 'Philology, Linguistics, and the Discourse'; Wolf, 'Old Norse – New Philology'; Firchow, 'Old Norse – New Philology: a Reply'; and Quinn and Lethbridge, *Creating the Medieval Saga*.

<sup>49</sup> An effective example of this is Rowe, *Development of Flateyjarbók*.

<sup>50</sup> See for instance the recent essay collection Acker and Larrington, *Poetic Edda*.

<sup>51</sup> Similarly Ursula Dronke has published three volumes of her edition, translation and commentary on selected heroic and mythological poems. *Hávam* and *Grí*, included in the recent third volume, are the only wisdom poems among her collection so far.

<sup>52</sup> Colton Williams, *Gnomic Poetry in Anglo-Saxon*.

<sup>53</sup> This was facilitated in Old English scholarship by the publication of Shippey's edition of the wisdom poems from the Exeter Book and elsewhere in a single volume as *Poems of Wisdom and Learning* in 1976.

sporadic studies since. Old English wisdom poetry has been more thoroughly studied as literature than its Old Norse counterpart.<sup>54</sup> The most significant exceptions are Carolyne Larrington's 1992 *A Store of Common Sense* – a book-length study which examines gnomic theme and style in all Old Norse wisdom poetry alongside the comparable tradition of Old English wisdom poetry; a series of articles by Elizabeth Jackson which examine the artistic merits of listing as a literary device in Old English and Old Norse;<sup>55</sup> and Bjarne Fidjestøl's hermeneutic study of *Sólarljóð* from 1979, which also includes text and translation of the poem.<sup>56</sup>

Old Norse wisdom poetry, and eddic poetry as a whole, has thus been well served by recent scholarship. Keener awareness of the poems' oral background and complex manuscript preservation has highlighted the need to readdress the way in which the texts were understood by contemporary readers and listeners. The milieu in which they did so was marked by close interaction between the written and the spoken word, and by layers of competing tradition and authority. What they recognised as wisdom was inextricably bound to the form of its presentation; consequently, analysis of what, in a sense, made wisdom into wisdom has a great deal to tell about the value and associations of eddic poetry, and about conceptions of knowledge and learning during a formative period. Wisdom poetry may not always be 'timelessly up-to-date' in its content or sentiments – the perils of chasing reindeer on slippery mountain slopes hold little direct relevance to the average twenty-first-century reader, and the living man may no longer always get the cow<sup>57</sup> – but in the way it problematizes knowledge and questions authority it cuts to the quick of human experience, now as much as in medieval Scandinavia: Ted Hughes would have been wrong to exclude wisdom poetry from the body of literature displaying 'a supreme, undistorted sense of actuality ... tested by such a formidable seriousness of life'.

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<sup>54</sup> See monographs by Hansen (*Solomon Complex*), Anlezark (*Old English Dialogues*), Howe (*Old English Catalogue Poems*) and Cavill (*Maxims in Old English Poetry*) as well as important articles such as Greenfield and Evert, 'Maxims II: Gnome and Poem'; and Shippey, 'The Wanderer and The Seafarer as Wisdom Poetry'.

<sup>55</sup> Jackson, 'Some Contexts and Characteristics', 'Art of the List-Maker' and 'Eddic Perspective on Short Item Lists'.

<sup>56</sup> Fidjestøl, *Sólarljóð*.

<sup>57</sup> *Hávam* v. 70 ll. 1–3 and v. 90 ll. 9–10 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 28 and 31; and transl. Larrington, pp. 23 and 26). Because of potential confusion between stanza and line numbers, 'v(v)' and 'l(l)' will be used throughout for Old Norse poetic texts.

AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

Eddic wisdom poetry constitutes a distinct if varied genre of Old Norse literature that can be examined alongside parallel compositions in a great many cultures and traditions. It would be naively optimistic, however, to pursue Old Norse wisdom poetry in isolation. Definition of the corpus and analysis of its significance in this dissertation depend on a broader contextual basis, including the place of the relevant texts within eddic poetry and Old Norse literature as a whole, and in light of developments in other fields, not least wider views of how knowledge and wisdom are conveyed. In the case of eddic wisdom verse, the presentation of wisdom is morally ambiguous and subjective. The content of wisdom poetry is only half the point: the real challenge lies in perceiving its applicability in a deceptive world. The various poems present analogous but always distinctive scenes of wisdom exchange in which the selection of content, the manner in which it is expressed and how it is understood are all dependent on the nature of the participants and their relationship. Even in monologues, an audience is always specified, and the speaking voice is never disinterested. Wisdom is never truly given freely. In the absence of a benevolent, all-knowing God, human motivation is required to drive a wisdom revelation. By examination of the presentation of subjectivity and personal interest in the framing narratives of eddic wisdom poems, it is possible to explore associations between speakers and authority. The situational nature of the narrative presentation of wisdom is hence a topic of crucial importance. It is one that has been better studied with regard to Old English poetry, in exploration of the situational context of speech-acts and gift exchanges in *Beowulf*, for example.<sup>58</sup>

The diverse manifestations of this theme in Old Norse wisdom poetry – the setting of wisdom poetry – will be central to this dissertation. The methodology I propose to use for it is based above all on close readings of the texts as they appear in the surviving manuscripts.<sup>59</sup> This will involve special attention to the lexical features of the poems. The texts, however, will not be studied in isolation. The generic classifications of eddic verse in particular will be re-examined in the course of this

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<sup>58</sup> Orchard, *Critical Companion*, pp. 203–37; Bazelmans, *By Weapons Made Worthy*; and Hill, ‘Beowulf and the Danish Succession’.

<sup>59</sup> I have worked from Neckel and Kuhn’s fifth edition of the Poetic Edda, but taken account of emendations and variant readings, with reference both to Neckel and Kuhn’s editorial apparatus and facsimiles of the original manuscripts.

## *I: Introduction*

dissertation. Old Norse wisdom poetry will also be contextualized and compared with other traditions, and in particular the most closely analogous medieval texts in Latin and Old English. I will in addition take account of the implications of studies into orality and literacy for the interpretation of this material as it is preserved.

The first problem which must be addressed in further detail is what constituted wisdom and wisdom literature for audiences in medieval Scandinavia. Chapter II focuses on this issue: it defines which eddic poems might be classed as dealing with wisdom and why. Particular points of interest include the place of wisdom poetry within the eddic corpus and definitions for ‘wisdom’ and associated concepts in Old Norse. With the material thus more closely defined, it is possible to move on and discuss how the audience of these poems might have conceived of their relationship to the fantastic characters and scenes which they inhabited – that is, why normative content for mankind was consistently expressed through the mouths of supernatural and legendary beings. This is addressed in Chapter III through a study of the vocabulary employed for mankind and the divine in Old Norse poetry. Chapter IV then considers the significance of the participants involved in wisdom poems, by examining the traditional poems which feature Óðinn as protagonist. His central role is explored, and three different types of scene are identified and examined: his extraction of wisdom from the living; his acquisition of wisdom from the dead; and his deployment of his own knowledge. The more disparate use of the conventions identified in these poems is the focus of Chapter V. This examines the parodic poems and also the manifestly Christian wisdom poems, and the way in which they use and twist traditional conventions to express complicated or dubious sources of authority and wisdom. The concluding Chapter VI then addresses the issue of what we may deduce from the preceding chapters about evolving cultural attitudes towards wisdom, authority and truth in medieval Iceland.

## II

### *Gáttir allar, áðr gangi fram, um scoðask scyli:*<sup>1</sup>

### Approaching Wisdom in Eddic Poetry

#### DEFINING WISDOM IN OLD NORSE

The task of defining wisdom literature in Old Norse might begin with consideration of what may be understood by and associated with terms relating to knowledge and ‘wisdom’ in Old Norse texts. Snorri Sturluson’s *Skáldskaparmál* ends with a sprawling series of lists of *heiti* for various concepts, loosely linked by association.<sup>2</sup> Thus he follows up his long list of *heiti* for speech (here *mál*)<sup>3</sup> with a shorter list of terms for wisdom (for which he uses the word *vit*), which include ‘speki, ráð, skilning, minni, ætlun, hyggjandi, tǫlvísi, langsæi, brag[ð]vísi,<sup>4</sup> orðspeki’ and ‘skorungskapr’.<sup>5</sup> While related, this group of terms covers a broad spectrum of meanings. *Vit* and *hyggjandi* relate most directly to cognitive ability, while *skilning* and *speki* might imply a more specific sort of discernment. *Ætlun* and *langsæi* suggest the application of this ability, but *tǫlvísi* comes closest of any of the terms to denoting the learning of a particular discipline or body of knowledge as such. *Minni* too represents a different kind of intellectual skill as it involves storing as well as deploying knowledge. The two terms that come closest to suggesting actual action, *ráð* and *orðspeki*, both relate to speech, which is necessary for the expression of *vit* or *speki*, or at least to any discourse informed by it. The second term, *orðspeki*, directly relates this list to the previous list of words for *mál*, as Snorri includes the very similar

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<sup>1</sup> ‘All entrances, before you walk forward, you should look at’. *Hávam* v. 1 ll. 1–3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 17; and transl. Larrington, p. 14). On the interpretation of *gáttir* see Dronke, *Poetic Edda* III, 50.

<sup>2</sup> This loose organization is due in part to the adaptation of later manuscript compilers: there is no way to know how Snorri’s text originally ended, but it is clear that compilers took an interest in adding further lists (Faulkes, *Skáldskaparmál* I, xlvi–l).

<sup>3</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 72 (ed. Faulkes I, 109; and transl. Faulkes, p. 154).

<sup>4</sup> Faulkes (*Skáldskaparmál* I, 226) argues that the manuscript reading *bragvísi* should be emended to *bragðvísi* and accordingly translates it as ‘subtlety’, as if *bragð* were the first element (Faulkes, *Skáldskaparmál* II, 249), but does not actually emend it in the main text.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Sagacity, counsel, understanding, memory, deliberation, intellect, numeracy, far-sightedness, subtlety, eloquence’; and ‘genius’. Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 72 (ed. Faulkes I, 109 ll. 9–10; and transl. Faulkes, p. 155).

## II: Approaching Wisdom in Eddic Poetry

compound *orðsnilli* in his list of types of speech.<sup>6</sup> The association of wisdom with speech made by several of these terms and by the placement of the list in context stresses that wisdom is not a passive quality, but a skill to be used. The nouns *hyggjandi* and *skilning* are formed from the verbs *hyggja* and *skilja* and refer to the active processes of thinking and separating out information in order to make sense of it.

The remaining two terms, *bragðvísi* and *skǫrungrskapr*, are more difficult to interpret. If Faulkes is correct and *bragvísi* should read *bragðvísi*, to give the meaning ‘cunning’ or ‘subtlety’, then it might serve to link the list of *heiti* for ‘wisdom’ with the list of *heiti* for *undirhyggja* that follows it by suggesting the potential to deceive that *vit* bestows.<sup>7</sup> This is not strictly necessary, however, as the leap from the intellectual powers of an individual to the potential for deceit is natural enough that it need not be made so explicitly. The point is repeatedly made in the wisdom poems, as I will discuss in Chapter VI. A compound with *bragr* (‘poetry’) is also possible and such an overt link between wisdom and poetry would be intriguing and again stresses the importance of mastery over language for expressing and making use of wisdom.<sup>8</sup> The final term, *skǫrungrskapr*, may hint at the possible moral connotations for wisdom, which are strikingly absent from the other terms on the list. Its interpretation depends upon how the first element, *skǫrungr*, is understood. Faulkes glosses the whole compound as ‘nobility of character’,<sup>9</sup> but while this is possible, it is not entirely clear that this is the sort of nobility that accomplishment in wisdom conveys. Yet at the very least, *skǫrungrskapr* suggests that although it may involve trickery, wisdom is nonetheless an elevating characteristic, an idea borne out in the literature.

It is curious to note, however, that not all of these terms are included in the Codex Upsaliensis manuscript of Snorra Edda.<sup>10</sup> This is typical of its treatment of the text as a whole and in particular of this portion of *Skáldskaparmál*, as it also gives shorter versions of several of the surrounding lists of *heiti* compared to the

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<sup>6</sup> This connection is not made in the Codex Upsaliensis version of the text (Uppsala, Uppsala University Library, DG 11 (s. xiv<sup>m</sup>)), which gives *snilli* rather than *orðsnilli* and omits *orðspeki*. Cf. Faulkes, *Skáldskaparmál* I, 149; and *Snorra Sturlason's Edda*, ed. Grape, Kallstenius and Thorell.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Dissembling’. Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 72 (ed. Faulkes I, 109 l. 11; and transl. Faulkes, p. 155).

<sup>8</sup> On *bragr* and *bragð*, see de Vries, *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, p. 52.

<sup>9</sup> Though he translates it as ‘genius’ (*Edda*, p. 155). Cf. de Vries, *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, p. 512; and Cleasby and Vigfusson, *Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 566.

<sup>10</sup> For the general background of this manuscript see Williams, ‘Projektet Originalversionen’; and *Snorra Sturlason's Edda*, ed. Grape, Kallstenius and Thorell.

unabridged, or perhaps expanded, texts preserved in the other three early witnesses to the text. It does not include six of the ten alternative terms for *vit* listed in the other manuscripts, listing only *speki*, *ráð*, *skilning* and *skorungskapr*. This appears to be an omission, as the six missing terms (*minni*, *ætlun*, *hyggjandi*, *tölvísi*, *langsæi*, *brag[ð]vísi* and *orðspeki*) occur consecutively in the other manuscript witnesses after *skilning*, but this impression is somewhat undermined by the more sporadic exclusion of terms in surrounding lists. If the Codex Upsaliensis version does deliberately omit most of the list, its purpose was not necessarily to deny that these terms fall within the remit of wisdom. It is more likely to be simply part of an effort to keep the lists more concise than exhaustive, as it mainly omits those terms that have to do with the application of wisdom rather than wisdom itself. A similar rationale may be present if the terms are interpolations, as they spell out the full range of meaning hinted at in the shorter list.<sup>11</sup> The ability to give *ráð*, for example, requires *orðspeki*.

The inclusive and nuanced concept of wisdom suggested by both versions of the list in *Skáldskaparmál* is very much in evidence elsewhere. If anything, the connotations of wisdom seem to be even broader than Snorri adumbrates. Snorri's list is noticeably focused on human rather than supernatural wisdom, but some of the terms he uses can clearly have magical or ritual associations. Memory, for instance, gives power to otherworldly figures like the *völva* who speaks in *Völuspá* and the giantess consulted in *Hyndluljóð*. The supernatural nature of their ability is hinted at in the latter poem, when Freyja suggests that a *minnisöl* is necessary in order for Óttarr to retain the information that has been presented.<sup>12</sup> More unambiguously magical are spells, and these kinds of speech acts appear to have been excluded from Snorri's list. These are also treated as a kind of wisdom in the Poetic Edda. *Hávamál* concerns itself with a variety of different kinds of wisdom, moving from the more common, everyday variety through to the increasingly esoteric, and (it would seem), increasingly valuable, types of knowledge.<sup>13</sup> The poem culminates in a list of *ljóð*, which Óðinn boasts he knows but does not deign to share. It may be that Snorri, as a

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<sup>11</sup> The relationship between the manuscripts is complicated and it is not possible to say with certainty whether the Codex Upsaliensis text represents a shortened form of the original text or whether the other manuscripts preserve an expanded version. For a summary of the problem, see Williams, 'Projektet Originalversionen' (which is a prelude to a larger project on the textual significance of the manuscript); and Faulkes, *Prologue and Gylfaginning*, pp. xxix–xxxiii.

<sup>12</sup> 'Memory-ale'. *Hyndluljóð* v. 45 l. 1 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 295; and transl. Larrington, p. 259). On this term's appearances in other texts, see von See *et al.*, *Kommentar* III, 820–1.

<sup>13</sup> On *Hávam*'s interest in different forms of knowledge see Dronke, *Poetic Edda* III, 37.

## II: Approaching Wisdom in Eddic Poetry

late medieval Christian, wished to suppress any pagan associations that wisdom might traditionally carry, or that he considered *ljóð* as no longer relevant.

### THE GENRES OF EDDIC POETRY

Such was Snorri's take on the semantics of wisdom in Old Norse; the concept of wisdom was no doubt broad and evolving, closely linked to speech as a skill to be developed.<sup>14</sup> The boundaries of wisdom literature as a genre are equally difficult to delineate. Genre is itself a flexible crutch; one which aids both composers or performers and audiences. It provides the former, in the terminology of Hans Robert Jauss, with a 'mode of writing' to guide new works into comprehensible frames of reference, and the latter with a 'horizon of expectations' with which they could judge and interpret new material.<sup>15</sup> As such, genre – interpreted loosely as a set of conventions used to contextualize a composition – is a useful tool to describe mediation between composer and audience, and can be based on a near infinite array of features finding expression in form, style and content. This mediation did not always take the form of straightforward conformity to a generic norm: authors might introduce limited innovative elements or choose to exploit the expectations of a genre by opposing or manipulating them. A work which conformed to one genre in form – for instance to eddic verse – might be malleable in many other respects, calling on the conventions and characteristics of other recognized categories of text.<sup>16</sup> It has been argued that heroic poems lie behind the development of heroic legendary sagas under the influence of courtly romances,<sup>17</sup> for example, while the neo-eddic compositions of *Solarljóð*, *Hugsvinnsmál* and *Svipdagsmál* illustrate how the eddic genre as a whole could be cross-fertilized with other textual categories and traditions. These later developments are more clearly visible thanks to their survival in a literate milieu in which eddic poetry had to some extent become an archaic entity – which I will explore in detail in Chapter V – but they raise important questions about what may have taken place at an earlier, less traceable stage in their preservation. Oral

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<sup>14</sup> On the role and terminology of speech in eddic verse, see Heusler, 'Sprichwörter'.

<sup>15</sup> Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic*.

<sup>16</sup> Important general discussions include Swales, *Genre Analysis*; Cliver, 'On Genres'; and, on the medieval generic tradition, Whetter, *Understanding Genre*, esp. pp. 9–34.

<sup>17</sup> Andersson, '*Helgakviða Hjörvarðsonar*', pp. 51–2; Tulinius, *Matter of the North*, pp. 55–65; and Holtsmark, 'Heroic Poetry and the Legendary Sagas', esp. pp. 14–21.

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composition and transmission in the form of different types of speech-act have been seen as having a significant effect on the growth of other genres in the Middle Ages and at other times,<sup>18</sup> and it is likely that eddic poetry is no different. Genre could thus work on a number of levels, and students of eddic poetry must be alive to the different ways in which numerous poets working over centuries might have plotted a complex course between their own and audiences' expectations of what constituted different expressions of this tradition.

Old Norse wisdom literature is found almost exclusively within the nebulous complex of eddic poems; hence much depends on appreciation of their place in the corpus of eddic poetry as a whole. This has less to do with the absolute distinctiveness of the wisdom genre than with the association of wisdom with the most characteristic elements of the Codex Regius poems. I will go on to explore the reasons anything approaching wisdom poetry is so rare in the skaldic corpus in Chapter VI. In constructing a generic taxonomy for eddic poetry, it is safest to begin with the arrangement and understanding of the material as presented in the Codex Regius. As has often been noted, the compiler of the Codex Regius seems to have had some sort of scheme for the organization of his material.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the modern distinction between mythological and heroic eddic poetry is based on the layout of the Codex Regius. In the manuscript there is a general division – emphasized by a very large initial – between the mythological and the heroic poems.<sup>20</sup> The former appear to be loosely arranged by protagonist, while the latter are organized into narrative cycles loosely revolving around the legendary heroes Helgi and Sigurðr.<sup>21</sup> Thus the manuscript opens with eleven poems that deal primarily, though not exclusively, with superhuman characters, and these are followed by, roughly speaking, two heroic cycles. The mythological poems only occupy a third of the manuscript and are not part of a unified whole in the same way as seems to be the case with poems attributed to the heroic cycles.<sup>22</sup> Neither division into mythological and heroic poems or by protagonist is seamless, and exceptions may immediately be noted. These include, for

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<sup>18</sup> Todorov, 'Origin of Genres', esp. pp. 163–4; and Bakhtin, 'Problem of Speech Genres'.

<sup>19</sup> Publications on the topic are discussed in Harris, 'Eddic Poetry', pp. 74–9. For recent cautionary comments see Clunies Ross, *History of Old Norse Poetry*, p. 15; and Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North*, p. 222.

<sup>20</sup> See *Codex Regius of the Elder Edda*, p. 39, l. 20. Also Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North*, pp. 16–20.

<sup>21</sup> For the latter see in general Heusler, 'Altnordische Dichtung und Prosa'.

<sup>22</sup> Judy Quinn ('Naming of Eddic Mythological Poems', p. 101) points out that because of the nature of mythological time it was not possible for the compiler to link the poems of the first section together into a single chronological sequence.

## II: Approaching Wisdom in Eddic Poetry

example, the interference of Óðinn and the prominence of the quasi-divine valkyries in both of the heroic cycles, and the appearance of human characters in the poems *Grímnismál* and *Völundarkviða*. The classic Odinic wisdom poems – *Hávamál*, *Grímnismál* and *Vafþrúðnismál* – occur in sequence after *Völuspá*. The connection here is obvious, as *Völuspá* too is presented as an Óðinn-instigated revelation. *Grímnismál* and *Vafþrúðnismál* are also copied consecutively in the AM 748 I 4to collection but in the reverse order.

It is difficult to perceive much more of the rationale for the sequence of the poems in AM 748 I 4to. *Grímnismál* and *Vafþrúðnismál* follow *Skírnismál* and, as in the Regius collection, are not sequentially associated with *Hárbarðsljóð*, another poem featuring Óðinn and his verbal prowess. Óðinn can also be seen to dominate the AM 748 I collection, appearing as protagonist in four of the seven poems.

Subject matter and protagonist offer relatively obvious points of reference for the classification of eddic poems, and their relevance to at least one thirteenth-century compiler cannot be discounted. But other criteria can also be discerned, and the survival of a number of native generic labels such as *senna*, *mál* and *spá* provides some important clues, but no straightforward answers. Generic classifications in medieval literature are generally quite fluid, and thus even those Old Norse generic labels that do survive are suspect as absolute markers. Some of them may be later appellations, possibly even by learned later medieval writers like Snorri who sought to organize and order the native Scandinavian tradition so as to bring it into line with Latin standards. Titles often post-date the postulated date of compositions for the works they describe, and these predate – in many cases may quite significantly predate – the manuscripts in which they are preserved. Even the most widely accepted native genre labels trouble critics who observe that reality is much more fluid than they might suggest. Joseph Harris, for example, observes that ‘the generic concept expressed in “eddic” poetry is essentially an assertion of stylistic analogy’ with the poems of the Codex Regius and consequently ‘the margins are nebulous’.<sup>23</sup>

Further insight into more traditional sub-genre divisions may possibly be gleaned from the titles of the poems. Like much of the rest of Old Norse literature, eddic poetry is characterized by generalized titles – when the poems are titled at all – which do not draw straightforward generic divisions. The majority of the poems are

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<sup>23</sup> Harris, ‘Eddic Poetry’, p. 69.

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simply titled as the speech of a particular character.<sup>24</sup> There is a rough correspondence between the *mál* poems and dialogues in *ljóðahátttr*,<sup>25</sup> and the *kviða* primarily composed in *fornyrðislag* and poems that are narrative and heroic in character. The range of poems described as *mál* includes a variety of content, though the form (a monologue or dialogue) is quite consistent. In *Sigrdrífumál* a valkyrie offers advice to her lover; *Eiríksmál* is a memorial poem for King Eiríkr Blóðøx, part of the larger genre of *erfíkvæði*,<sup>26</sup> relating the welcome he receives into Vallhøll; and *Vafþrúðnismál* is a wisdom contest which reveals valuable mythological information. This is not to say that dialogue cannot serve a narrative purpose. *Fáfnismál* and *Reginismál* relate narrative episodes within the Sigurðr cycle by bringing together groups of related short dialogues of varying types and metres joined together by short passages in prose.<sup>27</sup> A less disjointed narrative is related by *Skirnismál*, (titled *För Skírnis* ('Skírnir's journey') in the Codex Regius) which manages to describe the events of a romantic quest completely through dialogue.<sup>28</sup> The two most common title elements, *mál* and *kviða*, can thus be said to have more to do with form than content.

Modern scholars have, therefore, understandably often given form precedence over content when trying further to subdivide, or reconsider altogether, the eddic genres.<sup>29</sup> Terry Gunnell considers the form of the poems particularly significant as evidence for the dramatic performance of the poems and consequently champions a

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<sup>24</sup> Clunies Ross, *History of Old Norse*, pp. 29–30. Such titles that appear in medieval manuscripts include *Hávamál*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál*, *Hárbarðzlióð*, *Lokasenna*, *Prymsqviða*, *Alvíssmál*, *Völsungaqviða*, *Guðrúnarqviða*, *Qviða Guðrúnar*, *Guðrúnarhvöt*, *Hamðismál*, *Skírnis mál*, *Hymisqviða*, *Völsupá*, *Helgaqviða*, *Guðrúnarræða*, *Károljóð*, *Grottasöngur*, *Heimdalargaldr*, *Alsvinnsmál* and *Sigurðarqviða* (see Quinn, 'Naming of Eddic Mythological Poems', pp. 112–15).

<sup>25</sup> Examples include *Hávamál*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál*, *Skirnismál*, *Alvíssmál* and the untitled poems commonly referred to as *Sigrdrífumál*, *Fáfnismál* and *Reginismál*, as well as poems preserved elsewhere, such as the memorial lays *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*. Yet there are notable exceptions to this general rule. *Bjarkamál in fornu*, as it survives, is composed in *malahátttr*. *Hamðismál* is composed almost completely in *fornyrðislag* and is heroic and narrative in character. This is unlikely to be a mistake as the prose conclusion to the poem offers a second version of the title, also using *mál*: *Hamðismál in forno*.

<sup>26</sup> For discussion of the genre, see Harris, 'Erfíkvæði'; and Thorvaldsen, 'Generic Aspect'.

<sup>27</sup> For general scholarly background to both poems see von See *et al.*, *Kommentar V*, 224–31 and 355–67. On *Reg* in the broader context of the saga of the Völsungs see Wieselgren, *Quellenstudien zur Völsungasaga*, pp. 292–9.

<sup>28</sup> Aside from a prose introduction, there are two short prose interruptions within the poem, but neither contains any information that could not be directly inferred from the verse. See in general von See *et al.*, *Kommentar II*, 45–151.

<sup>29</sup> See Heusler's scheme (*Altgermanische Dichtung*, pp. 26–7), which does this with an aim to illuminating the social origin of various pieces.

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scheme put forward by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson.<sup>30</sup> According to this view, the poems are first classified according to whether they are dialogic poems, first-person monologues or narrative poems and then further subdivided within the first and third category based on a mix of structural and thematic criteria. While there is certainly good reason to privilege form over function to some extent, there is clearly difficulty with taking this principle too far. This sort of classification runs counter to the evidence of the titles, however vague, and separates poems that are clearly closely related, such as *Fáfnismál* with *Sigrdrífumál*,<sup>31</sup> and *Grímnismál* with *Vafþrúðnismál*. The content of the poems, taken alongside the evidence of the titles, suggests that we are perhaps mistaken in seeing too great a distinction between the monologue and dialogue forms. The ordering principles within these poems are remarkably similar and the style and content of *Völuspá* certainly align it more closely with the dialogue poem *Hyndluljóð* than with other first person monologues like *Hávamál* and *Grímnismál*. The *völva* presents information as stories, as part of a pattern of chronological narrative, rather than factual knowledge.<sup>32</sup>

Preferable in some ways is the model suggested by Heinz Klingenberg.<sup>33</sup> He only considers the mythological poems directly and he divides them into two basic types: the continuous-narrative type and the enumerative type. The continuous-narrative type ‘narrates a single myth in an epic dramatic sequence’, and is, ideally, entirely ‘self-contained’ and ‘self-sufficient’.<sup>34</sup> To this category he only explicitly assigns *Hymisqviða* and *Þrymsqviða* (though the inclusion of *Völundarqviða* can be inferred), observing that the enumerative type developed as the dominant form of mythological poetry. He goes on to argue that its influence is detectable in *Hymisqviða* and even in the heroic lays. The remaining poems then are all included under the heading of the enumerative type, of which he offers a remarkably detailed eight-point definition. Yet while this scheme does not camouflage similarities between poems in the same way that Gunnell’s does, it goes too far in downplaying important differences. He allows, for instance, that the enumeration may be of almost anything, including a vision or revelation, a knowledge contest or boasting and

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<sup>30</sup> Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Íslenskar bókmenntir í fornöld*, pp. 200–2. Cf. Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*, pp. 206–12 and 247–55; and Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North*, pp. 225–6.

<sup>31</sup> These two poems, together with *Reg* are not distinguished as separate works in the manuscript and neither the whole nor any of the constituent parts are titled.

<sup>32</sup> Quinn, ‘Dialogue with a *völva*’, p. 255.

<sup>33</sup> Klingenberg, ‘Types’.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

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altercation.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, he contends that these poems must involve the confrontation of inhabitants of different worlds. Objections based on apparent exceptions like *Lokasenna* and *Hárbarðzlióð* are anticipated and the former provides the basis of a case study. Klingenberg argues that *Lokasenna* is essentially a trial of Loki that leads directly to his punishment and stresses Loki's role in the events of *ragna rǫc*. This depends in large part on the acceptance of the prose conclusion to the poem as an integral part of it and possibly original, as it is only there that this encounter is directly linked to Loki being bound.<sup>36</sup> Equally, as Klingenberg himself points out, the poem is also an exposition of the gods' moral failings which in many cases are not at all dissimilar to Loki's. Both he and Óðinn are known to compromise their masculinity, for example, when there is some advantage to be had. Thus when Óðinn defends himself with an accusation against Loki, saying

Veiztu, ef ec gaf, þeim er ec gefa né scylda,  
inom slævorom, sigr:  
átta vetr vartu fyr iorð neðan  
kýr mól candi oc kona,  
oc hefir þú þar born borit,  
oc hugða ec þat args aðal.<sup>37</sup>

Loki throws it back at him and mockingly repeats the last line of Óðinn's stanza at the end of his to highlight their similarity.

Enn þic síða kóðo Sámseyo í,  
oc draptu á vétt sem vǫlor;  
vitca líki fórtu verþiód yfir,  
oc hugða ec þat args aðal.<sup>38</sup>

It is equally possible that *Lokasenna* is intended to portray conflict within the world of the gods as well as between the gods and giants. For all that Þórr may not be aware of Óðinn's identity in *Hárbarðzlióð*, the poem's dramatic and comic effect revolve around the audience's growing awareness of what Þórr does not see. Thus while

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>36</sup> This causal relationship is not evident in either the Codex Regius (vv. 31–3 and 35) or Hauksbók (vv. 34 and 35, ll. 5–8) version of *Vsp* (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 7–8) or Snorri's version of the story (Snorri Sturluson, *Gylf*, ch. 50 (ed. Faulkes, p. 48; and transl. Faulkes, p. 52)).

<sup>37</sup> 'You know, if I gave what I shouldn't have given, victory, to the faint-hearted, yet eight winters you were, beneath the earth, a woman milking cows, and there you bore children, and that I thought the hallmark of a pervert'. *Lok* v. 23 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 101; and transl. Larrington, p. 88).

<sup>38</sup> 'But you once practiced *seid* on Samsey, and you beat on the drum as witches do, in the likeness of a wizard you journeyed among mankind, and that I thought the hallmark of a pervert'. *Lok* v. 24 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 101; and transl. Larrington, p. 89).

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confrontation between inhabitants of different worlds is a theme common in the mythological poems, it is not universally present or (in some instances) is muted to an insignificant level.

The remainder of Klingenberg's criteria all relate somehow to the common form of these poems as speech acts within frames containing 'at least a germ of narrative suspense'.<sup>39</sup> While this is true, the nature of this frame, the extent to which it is developed and the way it is expressed vary considerably. Klingenberg's model helpfully highlights some of the most important recurring characteristics of eddic mythological poetry, but it also demonstrates that they are not applied consistently enough to support a clear division of the poems into even just two distinct groups. The relationship between the eddic poems thus calls for a more fluid model of overlapping categories which must be based on a somewhat delicate, which is not to say equal, balance between considerations of form and function. The eddic corpus is not large and not necessarily representative of what may have once existed, and so it remains important to consider each poem on its own terms. Parallels between poems provide comforting assurances that, while perhaps they may not be representative, they do appear to draw on a common range of conventions. By spelling out the characteristics of and relationships between poems, it may not be possible to draw clear boundaries between sub-genres, but we can better place the poems in relative position within an eddic complex.

There are, however, several other generic labels less frequently attested that seem to indicate more specific types of speech-act. Some of the most straightforward are the poems of prophecy called *spá* and the *senna*. The content of the *spá* poems is not unlike that of *Grímnismál* and *Vafþrúðnismál*. *Völuspá*, for instance, has some parallels with the theme and content of the poems that follow it in Codex Regius, which have probably led the compiler of the manuscript to order the poems as he has. The poem deals with Óðinn's quest for knowledge, which provides the narrative impetus as well as a context for the revelation of important mythological information. Yet the form of the poem, along with the identity of the speaker, suggests the distinctiveness of the *spá* genre from wisdom poetry and aligns it more strongly with other narrative genres, as the information is presented in chains of narrative and the poem is consequently composed in *fornyrðislag*.

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<sup>39</sup> Klingenberg, 'Types', p. 135.

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The *sennur*, in contrast, find their closest parallels among the other mythological poems of the Codex Regius, though they themselves need not take place between mythological characters. The term *senna* essentially denotes a particular manifestation of *flyting* particular to Old Norse.<sup>40</sup> There are several uncontested poetic examples, yet it is striking that the genre is only explicitly identified by the title *Lokasenna*. In the case of the Helgi poems, it is likely to be because the *sennur* occur as episodes within a larger narrative. This does not mean that they all originated in the poetic context in which they have been preserved. The exchange between Atli and Hrímgæðr in *Helgaqviða Hiorvarðssonar*, for instance, is set off by relatively lengthy prose summaries, which are necessary to tie it into the rest of the poem in lieu of a direct plot connection. The episode runs to nineteen stanzas in length and is completely self-contained and set off metrically from the surrounding stanzas in *fornyrðislag*. In other cases, such as *Hyndljúð*, the *senna* may not have a separate origin, but may simply be subjugated to the dominant mode of the poem. *Hárbarðzljúð* is the most difficult poem to account for, as it contains some features that are otherwise unparalleled. The poem has been alternatively considered a *senna*, a *mannjafnaðr* or a combination of the two forms.<sup>41</sup> The metre vacillates wildly. The basic elements that link it to the other *sennur*, though perhaps used to varying effect in *Hárbarðzljúð*, also have parallels among the exchanges in the *mál* poems. The exchange of names, for instance, is very common and occurs in *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Baldrs draumar* and at the start of *Fáfnismál*.<sup>42</sup> The flyting form can thus be deployed for various purposes and it seems to be the content of the poems rather than their form that distinguishes them from the poems most closely related to them in form and structure.

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<sup>40</sup> While there is little doubt that it does denote some sort of formalized verbal contest, there is debate over how rigid and well defined the conventions of the *senna* actually are and whether it should be considered distinct from the related *mannjafnaðr*: Harris, ‘*Senna*’; Clover ‘Germanic Context’; and Marcel and Padmos, ‘*Senna—Mannjafnaðr*’.

<sup>41</sup> See Marcel and Padmos, ‘Two Types of Verbal Dueling’; and Clover, ‘*Hárbarðsljúð* as Generic Farce’. Both arguments are based on suspiciously elaborate definitions of the *senna* as a genre, which in the second instance lead Clover to argue that *Hárbarðsljúð* is a parody of the flyting form.

<sup>42</sup> *Vafþr* vv. 7–8; *Bdr* vv. 5–6; and *Fáfn* vv. 1–4 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 46, 277–8 and 180–1).

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### THE GENRE OF EDDIC WISDOM POETRY

Like the rest of eddic verse, wisdom poetry cannot be defined with a single list of essential criteria. Even its function, to enumerate wisdom, can encompass a body of material as varied as the concepts included under the umbrella of the term. Most *mál* poems take the form, broadly speaking, of a sequence of stanzas linked by some principle other than narrative and are normally cast as the direct speech of one or more characters – though, as noted above, some of the most important exceptions to this general rule occur in wisdom poems: *Hávamál* includes two brief narrative passages and *Vafþrúðnismál* contains a single stanza of third person narration. The implications of this use of narrative within dialogue poetry are explored below in Chapters IV and VI. The general structuring principle of wisdom dialogues may closely resemble that of the *sennur*, with characters speaking in alternating stanzas. Even in monologues, when only one voice is heard, a similar scene of exchange may be alluded to, as in *Hávamál* and *Grímnismál*, which are discussed in Chapter IV.

One of the most striking aspects of Old Norse wisdom poetry, and perhaps what best distinguishes it from the other traditions with which it was in contact, is that it is so often cast as the speech of particular individuals. For all that the statements are themselves general by nature, they are thus also always qualified by the situation in which they are expressed and the speaker expressing them. More often than not, Óðinn is involved and I will go on to discuss the significance of this as well as the substitution of other characters and the consequences of the convention for this convention as manifested in poems like *Sólarljóð* and even *Hugsvinnismál* in Chapter V.

The metre of wisdom poetry is all but invariably *ljóðaháttur*, which again is characteristic of mythological dialogues more generally, suggesting this is the natural context for wisdom revelation. It is also particularly suited for expressing non-narrative material, though it is occasionally used (apparently in a minority of cases) to relate narratives. The best example from the Poetic Edda, as mentioned above, is *Skírnismál*, but there is evidence for another possible example in *Skáldskaparmál*. Snorri relates a myth about an encounter between Þórr and the giant Geirrþōðr and his daughters, in which he unusually breaks from his narrative to quote a stanza of eddic

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verse in *ljóðahátttr*, which is presented as the direct speech of Þórr.<sup>43</sup> The Codex Upsaliensis version quotes a second stanza, also spoken by Þórr, very similar to the first and likely from the same poem.<sup>44</sup> *Þórsdrápa*, the skaldic poem which Snorri cites as evidence for the myth at the end of his narrative account, is highly allusive and could hardly furnish all the details Snorri includes and it is in curiously strong agreement with the detail of the brief eddic quotation. It is possible, then, that Snorri's own account derives in large part from an otherwise unattested eddic poem in *ljóðahátttr*. As wisdom literature is confined to *ljóðahátttr*, but *ljóðahátttr* is not confined to wisdom literature, it is likely that it is the associations of the metre that wisdom literature seeks to draw on, rather than a direct connection between *ljóðahátttr* and gnomic utterance.<sup>45</sup>

The suitability of *ljóðahátttr* derives from what is perhaps the most distinctive feature of wisdom poetry: that it expresses information in short, self-contained sections. Narrative is sometimes employed even within wisdom poems, but its role is always secondary: it is not the events themselves that are of interest, but the evidence they provide for a more generalized truth. Thus *Hávamál* demonstrates the fickleness of both sexes in love, a theme introduced in stanzas 91–3 and followed up in stanza 102, with two stories in which the male and female characters get the better of each other respectively.<sup>46</sup> *Sólarljóð* plays on the audience's expectation of something similar by quoting a traditional maxim:

Óvinum þínum trú þú aldri,  
þótt fagrt mæli fyr þér;  
góðu þú heit, gótt er annars  
víti hafa at varnaði.<sup>47</sup>

This is then supported by a narrative anecdote in which a man called Sörli trusts his brother's killers and is killed himself as a result. The poem then turns the maxim on

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<sup>43</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 18 (ed. Faulkes I, 24–5; and transl. Faulkes, pp. 81–3).

<sup>44</sup> See *Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 317–18.

<sup>45</sup> Some scholars (see for example Williams, *Gnomic Poetry*; Quinn, 'Verseform and Voice'; and Bliss, 'Origin and Structure') have postulated a connection between *ljóðahátttr* and 'hypermetric' Old English verse lines. These lines, which are difficult to categorize (for selected discussion see Bliss, *Metre*, pp. 91–2; Pope, *Rhythm*, pp. 99–158; and Sievers, 'Der angelsächsische Schwellvers'), are found widely scattered in Old English verse; wisdom poetry was one context in which they were especially popular, as well as particularly emphatic passages of narratives, such as beginnings or endings of poems, sub-units or speeches (Timmer, 'Expanded Lines', esp. pp. 228–9).

<sup>46</sup> Similar digressions are also characteristic of the structure of the Old English *Maxims*. See in particular *Maxims IB (Poems of Wisdom and Learning)*, ed. and transl. Shippey, pp. 66–71).

<sup>47</sup> 'Never trust your enemies, though they speak fair words to you; promise good things; it is good to have another's punishment as warning'. *Sól* v. 19 (ed. and transl. Larrington and Robinson, p. 308).

its head, by revealing that for all that Sorli got a bad return for his good faith in this life, in the wider context of Christian afterlife justice is done. He paradoxically emerges as the victor, gaining a place in heaven while his foes are condemned to hell. Again, the story is not told for its own sake, but serves as a comment on the truth of a generalized saying – in this case debunking it. Such extended narratives are reasonably uncommon and relatively brief, and do not threaten the dominant mode of the poems or disrupt the metre. Far more common are allusions to stories, as they can also serve the function of commentary but without disrupting the rhythm and progress of the poem.

The *ljóðaháttir* stanza can usually be subdivided into two half-stanzas, each of which is often a distinct syntactic unit. One half contains the maxim, whether advice or information, and the other may be a comment, expansion, narrative allusion or refrain. This allows the poet a great deal of freedom in selecting and stringing, or perhaps re-stringing, stand-alone statements together to achieve his own poetic aims. This potential can be seen clearly in the various uses to which the famous lines

Deyr fé,        deyia frændr,  
deyr síálfr it sama<sup>48</sup>

are put.<sup>49</sup> *Hávamál* offers two different concluding half-stanzas, essentially saying the same thing in different ways:

enn orðztírr        deyr aldregi,  
hveim er sér góðan getr

and

ec veit einn,    at aldri deyr:  
dómr um dauðan hvern.<sup>50</sup>

It may be an encyclopedic impulse that leads the poet to repeat himself, or perhaps he was as moved by the heroic sentiment as modern audiences have been. It is also possible that the second instance is meant to refocus attention on Óðinn as the speaker of the poem and reinforce a common sentiment with the weight of his authority, a point I will take up in Chapter II. In *Hákonarmál* this maxim is redeployed to

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<sup>48</sup> ‘Cattle die, kinsmen die, the self must also die’. *Hávnm* vv. 76–7. (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 29; and transl. Larrington, p. 24).

<sup>49</sup> The coincidence of rephrasing has been taken as evidence of a direct relationship between *Hávamál* and *Hákonarmál* (see von See, *Die Gestalt*, pp. 48–50; and Larrington, *Common Sense*, pp. 182–4), but it is equally possible that the lines pre-date both.

<sup>50</sup> ‘But glory never dies, for the man who is able to achieve it; I know one thing which never dies: the reputation of each dead man’. *Hávnm* v. 76 ll. 4–6 and v. 77 ll. 4–6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 24; and transl. Larrington, p. 24).

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consider the same heroic situation from the point of view of those a hero leaves behind. The long line is replaced by ‘eyðisk land ok láð’ and the second half-stanza reads:

síz Hókon fór með heiðin goð,  
morg es þjóð of þeuð.<sup>51</sup>

In this way the meaning of what appears to have been a common saying is manipulated to suit the purposes of varying contexts.<sup>52</sup>

This division within the stanzas often promotes a strikingly rigid and regular structure to these poems, which may serve as a mnemonic aid. Thus in a series of stanzas in *Grímnismál* the names of the homes of the gods are listed and numbered in the first half of each stanza and some information about them is provided in the second. In both *Hávamál* and *Grímnismál* recurring refrains or numeration are vital for maintaining a sense of order and progression. In the dialogue poems *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Alvíssmál*, refrains are used to keep the narrative frame in the foreground, as the speakers address their opponents by name and renew their challenges. More practically, refrains also serve as stanza fillers, allowing the questions to take up the same amount of space as the answers and thereby maintaining a sense of balance within the dialogue. As well as these structural considerations, *ljóðaháttir* was the natural medium for expressing wisdom in Old Norse because of its association with the quoted speech of mythological figures, and it is therefore less surprising than it may initially seem that the metre should be so universally characteristic of wisdom poetry.

### THE EXPRESSION OF WISDOM IN EDDIC POETRY

Thus the place of wisdom poetry within the generic complex of eddic verse can be broadly described. But it remains to move from consideration of the place of wisdom in eddic poetry to the actual eddic expression of wisdom. Central to this is closer examination of the form and nature of the smaller units which make up the relevant poems in order to generalize about gnomic utterance or style and to recognise it

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<sup>51</sup> ‘Lands and territories come to naught’; and ‘... since Hákon went among the heathen gods, many a nation has been enslaved’. Eyvindr Finsson skáldaspillir, *Hákm* v. 21 (*Skj* BI, 60).

<sup>52</sup> Something very like it is also used in the Old English *The Wanderer* 108–9 (*Exeter Book*, ed. Krapp and Dobbie, p. 137).

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within works, both prose and poetry, of other genres.<sup>53</sup> Not least among the difficulties in doing so is defining ‘gnomic’ and related terms. While the label of ‘wisdom’ derives directly from the texts in which it was first identified, ‘gnomic’ is a nineteenth-century borrowing from Greek that has been used by scholars to describe the sententious material of other literary cultures.<sup>54</sup> This expanding vocabulary is in part reflective of an awareness of the inadequacy of single terms to describe the complex reality of wisdom literature within and between cultures. While the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘gnome’ as synonymous with ‘proverb’ and ‘maxim’,<sup>55</sup> the three terms are often used, either explicitly or implicitly, to indicate subtle differences between statements. The Chadwicks noted in the 1930s that no satisfactory definition of ‘gnome’ existed, for all that it was often used to refer in particular to statements in Old English that do not relate directly to human behaviour and are therefore clearly excluded by Aristotle’s definition of a gnome as ‘a statement not relating to particulars ... but to universals; yet not to all universals indiscriminately, as e.g. that straight is the opposite of crooked, but to all such as are the objects of (human) action and are to be chosen or avoided in our doings’.<sup>56</sup>

The problem of distinguishing these concepts is in many ways further compounded rather than resolved by attempts to find wide-ranging correspondences between the content and the form of sayings.<sup>57</sup> The exercise led Paul Cavill to the somewhat hopeless conclusion that ‘a salient feature of the form is ambiguity’.<sup>58</sup> Larrington notes that a proverb is in part defined as a saying ‘which must be in common currency’, and that this criterion is very difficult to satisfy conclusively from medieval texts.<sup>59</sup> ‘Precept’, the other term she identifies as carrying a distinctive

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<sup>53</sup> Hansen (‘Parental Wisdom’, pp. 53–4) argues that maxims are quoted so often in *Beowulf* because the conventions of wisdom literature were very well established. Cavill (*Maxims in Old English*, pp. 20–5) makes a similar point about their use in Old English poetry and further points out that even fuller use of them is made in Old Norse literature, as they occur commonly in saga prose as well as verse.

<sup>54</sup> Cavill, *Maxims in Old English*, p. 10.

<sup>55</sup> To this ever-expanding list could also be added ‘precept’ and ‘saying’. While these terms are each distinguished by their literal meaning, it may or may not be reflected in their use which is more often than not very generalized. Blanche Colton Williams (*Gnomic Poetry*, p. 8) sets out a typically inclusive definition, allowing that gnomes ‘may or may not be proverbial; may express a physical truth, announce a moral law or uphold an ethical idea. The language may be literal or figurative’.

<sup>56</sup> Chadwick and Chadwick, *Growth of Literature I*, 377.

<sup>57</sup> There are a number of relevant studies, though most concentrate on Old English wisdom poetry or treat Old English and Old Norse together. See in particular Barley, ‘Structural Approach’; Hansen, ‘Parental Wisdom’, pp. 55–9, *Solomon Complex*, pp. 3–11; and Larrington, *Store of Common Sense*, pp. 2–9.

<sup>58</sup> Cavill, *Maxims in Old English*, p. 59.

<sup>59</sup> Larrington, *Store of Common Sense*, pp. 4–5.

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meaning, is also somewhat problematic. She identifies it with the use of an imperative verb or modal verb such as *skal*, and indeed sayings that use these do prescribe human behaviour.<sup>60</sup> Yet the same function can be expressed impersonally, as *Hávamál* frequently does, by introducing a hypothetical *maðr* whose action (expressed by a present tense verb) is judged to be advisable or ill advised.<sup>61</sup>

These terms cease to be meaningful when they are rigidly defined, as they draw distinctions between concepts and forms that were clearly not separate in the praxis of medieval composition. Daisy Clarke's 1923 edition of *Hávamál* demonstrates what is lost when theoretical categories derived from other traditions are faithfully applied to Old Norse wisdom poetry. Having searched the whole of Old Norse poetry for gnomes more in line with this Greek definition with which to compare the gnomic material of *Hávamál*,<sup>62</sup> Clarke identified (along with some occasional maxims within the heroic poetry) only three other poems with substantial gnomic passages. Two of these poems, *Sigrdrifumál* and *Reginismál*, are to be found in the Codex Regius and Clarke identifies within them a series of sixteen and six gnomic stanzas respectively. The stanzas from *Reginismál*, she notes, are not purely gnomic as they are based 'on magic rather than on common sense', but as this is also true of parts of the gnomic stanzas of *Hávamál* she retains them.<sup>63</sup> This undermines her exclusion of magic more generally, as very little separates stanza 137 of *Hávamál* from the spells described in 'Ljóðatal'.

Also problematic for a strict application of the classical definition of gnomes are the 'incidental' gnomic stanzas Clarke identifies within *Reginismál* and *Fáfnismál*.<sup>64</sup> Among them is stanza 4 of *Reginismál*, which forms part of a brief exchange between Loki and Andvari.<sup>65</sup> The end of the passage is marked by a prose conclusion and the quotation of a stanza of prophecy, which is marked out from the above exchange by a shift into *fornyrðislag*. The exchange is structured with

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<sup>60</sup> Many definitions, like the Chadwicks' (*Growth of Literature* I, 382), consider only statements using imperative verbs to be precepts, creating an even greater overlap between this category and maxims.

<sup>61</sup> Such constructions appear to be quite popular in Old Norse wisdom poetry. This is evident from *Hsv* (ed. and transl. Wills and Wurth), which frequently translates straightforward imperative statements from its Latin source – assuming it was not too different from surviving versions of the *Disticha Catonis* (ed. Duff and Duff, *Minor Latin Poets*, pp. 585–639) – in this way.

<sup>62</sup> Clarke (*Hávamál*, p. 18) defines this as stanzas 1–95, 102 and 103, and 111–37.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, p. 18. The guiding principle behind their inclusion in *Reg* may have been the inculcation of *sapientia et fortitudo*: Haimerl, 'Sigurd – ein Held des Mittelalters', pp. 82–5.

<sup>64</sup> Clarke, *Hávamál*, pp. 24–5. On the gnomic character of *Fáfn* see von See *et al.*, *Kommentar* V, 366–7.

<sup>65</sup> For context see von See *et al.*, *Kommentar* V, 288–90; Wieselgren, 'Quellenstudien', pp. 292–300; and Ussing, *Om det inbyrdes Forhold*, pp. 71–5 and 78–80.

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alternating stanzas in which Loki asks a question and Andvari answers it. With the first question he enquires about the identity (and nature) of his prey and in the next threatens that he will kill Andvari if he is unable to answer. This scene is not unusual: speakers often take advantage of any opportunity to challenge supernatural antagonists to display their wisdom, and is particularly reminiscent of the wisdom contest set out at the start of *Vafþrúðnismál*. What differentiates it is the nature of Loki's second question,

hver giöld fá gumna synir,  
ef þeir hoggvaz orðom á?<sup>66</sup>

Andvari replies:

Ofrgiöld fá gumna synir,  
þeir er Vaðgelmi vaða;  
ósaðra orða, hverr er á annan lýgr,  
of lengi leiða limar.<sup>67</sup>

While this is gnomic, as it offers a generalized observation about human behaviour, it is not expressed any differently from the mythological information in *Vafþrúðnismál*. As Cavill observes, even the ethical type of maxim is presented as a simple fact.<sup>68</sup> The abstract nature of the comment is counteracted by the citation of the river name, specifying the place of suffering. The closest parallel for this scene, however, occurs in *Fáfnismál*, within the same complex of poems. The poem opens with a very similar (though more fully drawn out) exchange in which Fáfnir questions Sigurðr about his identity and then both proceed to speak different kinds of wisdom, including mythological facts as well as gnomes.<sup>69</sup> As there is no grammatical or syntactic distinction between the ways in which gnomes and mythological information are expressed, and as they are apparently mixed freely within clearly unified episodes, there is no reason to consider gnomes as in any way fundamentally distinct from the mythological facts of *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál* or *Alvíssmál*. Everything is phrased as observation rather than exhortation: an expression of the world as it is for all kinds of beings with only the vaguest acknowledgement of individual control.

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<sup>66</sup> 'What requital do they get, the sons of men, if they wound each other with words?'. *Reg v.* 3 ll. 4–6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 174; and transl. Larrington, p. 152).

<sup>67</sup> 'A terrible requital the sons of men get, they have to wade in Vadgelmir; for untrue words, when one man lies about another, for a long time he'll suffer the consequences'. *Reg v.* 4 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 174; and transl. Larrington, p. 152).

<sup>68</sup> Cavill, *Maxims in Old English*, p. 43.

<sup>69</sup> On the vocabulary of this section and its connotations, see Kuhn, 'Das Eddastück', pp. 91–3.

CONCLUSION

The corpus of Old Norse eddic wisdom poetry remains resistant to straightforward classification. It includes (in the Codex Regius) the mythological poems *Hávamál*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál* and *Alvíssmál*, and sequences within the complex of heroic poetry entitled *Reginismál*, *Fáfnismál* and *Sigrdrifumál*; to this may be added the learned Christian compositions *Sólarljóð* and *Hugsvinnsmál* (which may be directly modelled on some of the Codex Regius poems). It might also be stretched, as I propose in Chapter VI, to include the more anomalous skaldic *Málsháttakvæði*, the eddic riddle collection preserved in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* and the neo-eddic *Svipdagsmál*.

What might be said about this diverse selection of material is that, particularly in the context of the Codex Regius, wisdom poetry is primarily associated with mythological speakers, and particularly with the figure of Óðinn. All of the eddic wisdom poems are cast in *ljóðahátt*, and all represent the speech of specific characters on particular occasions. These conventions in themselves were open to considerable variation, and could be adapted to a range of different contexts in poems outside the Codex Regius, as will be discussed in the following chapters.

### III

## Mankind and the Gods in Eddic Verse

#### INTRODUCTION: THE OLD NORSE GODS IN CONTEXT

The mythological frames of the wisdom poems are an integral and consistent feature of the genre. Wisdom for men almost always comes from supernatural lips, not in the form of edicts, but as observations about the nature of a cosmos they also inhabit. References to pagan deities abound throughout Old Norse poetry, but exactly how their reality was supposed to relate to that of the human audience is often far from clear, and doubtless varied across place and time. Yet these supernatural figures clearly enjoyed a continued relevance in the Christian period and managed to pass from myth into literature with considerable success.<sup>1</sup>

The cultural background that made this transfer possible is reflected in poetic terminology for mankind and the gods: the gods were, in short, conceived of as essentially similar to human beings, inhabiting more or less the same space and governed by the same basic conditions of life. Even when belief in their divinity became absolutely disallowed,<sup>2</sup> their rationalization as fully human allowed them to be preserved in literature as human archetypes. A widespread tendency, extending back to the Hellenistic Greek philosopher Euhemeros of Messina (*fl.* late 4th century BC), was indeed to see the gods as humans of strength and power who had come in the course of time to be worshipped as divinities. Christian writers from Cyprian (d. 258) onwards took Euhemeros' proposal several steps further, specifically adding that demons had been responsible for the wrongful deification of men. However, there was less certainty about the status of the figures themselves who had been cultivated as gods. For some writers they too were demons. Yet for other observers they remained heroes and dynastic founders, worthy of honour and celebration if not of

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Abram, 'Gylfaginning and Early Medieval Conversion Theory'.

<sup>2</sup> On the general background of euhemeristic thought in the ancient and medieval periods, see Winiarczyk, *Euhemeros von Messene*. For the Old Norse context see Faulkes, 'Descent from the Gods'; and Schjødt, 'Freyr and Fróði and Some Reflections on Euhemerism'.

worship. This was the view to which Snorri Sturluson and Saxo Grammaticus subscribed when they approached the heathen gods in the Prose Edda and the *Gesta Danorum* respectively,<sup>3</sup> and although explicit comments elsewhere in Scandinavian literature are scarce, euhemerism likely provided a widespread defence for continued propagation of stories concerning heathen gods.

The attraction which euhemerization held for Scandinavians may have derived from both its respectable scholarly origins and from features of pre-existing belief.<sup>4</sup> Behind the latter were fundamental differences in the perception of pre-Christian and Christian deities.<sup>5</sup> These differences facilitated the adoption of euhemeristic interpretations that perpetuated the view embedded in the wisdom poems themselves: that the wisdom of the gods speaks to the concerns of mankind. The question of what exactly a ‘god’ or supernatural being is understood to be in any culture is a difficult one. Indeed, even a conception of ‘supernatural’ depends on a firm view of what can or could constitute ‘natural’: a view which cannot always be traced in medieval or other pre-modern beliefs.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the term will be retained for convenience, to refer to the congeries of unseen creatures, forces and entities which made up Old Norse pre-Christian belief. Religious anthropologists stress that while belief in the supernatural is widespread – perhaps even universal – in human cultures, incredible variety exists between religions in their concepts of how these beings or forces actually relate to each other and to the human world.<sup>7</sup> Even the terminology is problematic and depends on an individual’s point of view: many religions count as part of their conception of the natural order beings that outsiders would class as self-evidently ‘supernatural’. Euhemerism, for example, was born out of philosophically informed reflection on Classical paganism, which provides an interesting analogue to Old Norse mythology and puts some of its distinctive features into relief. Classical paganism is better recorded in the words of contemporary believers and more

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<sup>3</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum* I.vii.1 (ed. Olrik and Ræder I, 25).

<sup>4</sup> Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 50–1.

<sup>5</sup> For an important overview, see Dubois, *Nordic Religions*, esp. pp. 29–32. These differences are further elaborated in Chapters V and VI.

<sup>6</sup> Winzeler, *Anthropology and Religion*, esp. pp. 6–9; and Eller, *Introducing Anthropology of Religion*, pp. 34–44.

<sup>7</sup> The literature on different cosmological beliefs and the anthropology of religion is very extensive. For a selection of useful general readings which inform my interpretation, see Bowie, *Anthropology of Religion*; Winzeler, *Anthropology and Religion*; and Eller, *Introducing Anthropology of Religion*, pp. 82–109. For a cognitive view of how individuals (real or imagined) interact in a religious framework, see Lawson, ‘Agency and Religious Agency’.

thoroughly studied by ancient and modern scholars.<sup>8</sup> The evolving conception of Greek divinities (to say nothing of many other supernatural entities such as ‘spirits’) was markedly different from the Judeo-Christian understanding of a single God. As Albert Henrichs points out, however, the poets of epic literature tell us ‘who is who among the gods, but they do not reveal what it is that makes a god a god’.<sup>9</sup> He goes on to suggest a generalized implicit definition of a Greek god as immortal, anthropomorphic and in possession of divine power. This power is the most ubiquitous and varied quality of divinity. It is not absolute like that of the Christian God, and is normally defined in contrast to human ability. Indeed, it often takes a display of superhuman power to reveal the presence of a god among men or corroborate their divinity. As in Old Norse texts, the possibility for deception that the gods’ anthropomorphized form allows is often exploited in myths. Unlike the Christian God, the Greek gods are subject to conditions of mortal existence such as birth and reproduction, but not to death. Henrichs refers to immortality as the ultimate benchmark of the Greek gods’ divinity. The contrast here with the Norse gods is striking, as some of the most prominent myths in the highly eschatological religion (as the texts express it) centre on the gods’ futile quest to circumvent their own mortality: age is delayed by apples, the destructive forces of the giants held at bay in the present and possibility of resurrection held out for a select few, but again and again we are assured that the principal members of the pantheon will die.

‘Gods’ – however defined – should not be allowed to dominate views of pre-Christian Scandinavian beliefs completely. Other forces and entities can be traced through surviving texts, inscriptions, archaeological remains and comparative studies, particularly of the Sámi peoples. The latter in particular lived in close proximity to the pre-Christian vikings and preserved a rich set of beliefs with a prominent element of natural and ancestor ‘spirits’ as well as ‘gods’ comparable to those of Old Norse mythology.<sup>10</sup> Evidence for these beliefs is largely derived from later sources, and should not be applied to other parts of the pre-Christian Scandinavian world too readily. Even so, traces survive for similar, smaller-scale belief in ‘spirits’ in various

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<sup>8</sup> See Henrichs, ‘What Is a Greek God?’ and other papers in the same volume.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28

<sup>10</sup> Sámi beliefs were of course diverse, and varied considerably across time and distance. Selected studies of, for example, the particularly prominent bear cult, include Pentikäinen, *Golden King of the Forest*; and Honko, Timonen, Branch and Bosley, *Great Bear*. More general discussions include Karsetn, *Religion of the Samek*; Pentikäinen, *Kalevala Mythology*; and Siikala, *Mythic Images*.

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parts of the Old Norse-speaking area.<sup>11</sup> For present purposes analysis of pre-conversion religion will focus on the particular literary manifestation in the Poetic Edda and related sources. In these texts, whatever the situation in earlier times, the gods stand out very prominently. To a large extent this is hardly surprising: such powerful, anthropomorphized beings tend to feature more prominently in literary sources in a range of cultures.<sup>12</sup> Of necessity, the view taken here therefore focuses strongly on the beings which stand out in the literary view of the pagan world: particularly the *æsir*, though they did not completely exclude the presence of *vanir*, elves and other beings from the literature. Even among them, hard and fast distinctions and definitions often prove evasive.

#### WORDS FOR MEN, GODS AND OTHERS

Composers of texts in Old Norse were faced with applying native terminology to a broad range of supernatural entities. A systematic examination of this terminology is necessary in order to test assumptions and rarefy more general impressions about the nature of the supernatural world in which the texts of the Poetic Edda were set. By the time the Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda, and indeed all other extant Old Norse manuscripts, were produced Christianity had taken hold in Scandinavia, adding a whole new element to what was probably an already complex range of pre-existing labels. Writing and manuscript preservation were dominated by the Church: as such, a much clearer and richer view survives of the terminology applied to the figures of Christian belief. Eddic poetry on mythological subjects will therefore be taken as the starting point, but the evidence of skaldic terminology for the beings of pre-Christian mythology will also be considered. The large corpus of skaldic poetry provides important material for comparison with the advantage of in many cases being attributed (albeit with varying reliability) to actual historical figures or associated with real events that may provide some basis for dating. Finally, I will bring in a brief consideration of the vocabulary for the divine in explicitly Christian poetry in order to highlight some contrasts that suggest some of the reasons that these mythologies were

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<sup>11</sup> Dubois, *Nordic Religions*, pp. 45–68.

<sup>12</sup> Henrichs, 'What Is a Greek God?', pp. 23–8.

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able to co-exist, as they did in language of skaldic poetry over several productive centuries.

By considering terminology for humanity and the divine across Old Norse poetry, it is possible to clarify how various supernatural beings were conceived of and, to an extent, how these conceptions were reconciled with the world-view of Christian religion. Firm conclusions may not be possible, but some tentative hypotheses can be tested and are necessary for any productive study of the literary incarnation of Old Norse mythology.

#### *The treatment of mythological figures in eddic diction*

It is in eddic poetry that mythological figures, and Óðinn most of all, receive the most developed treatment. First preserved in manuscripts of the thirteenth century and after, this poetry is anonymous and purports to report the direct speech of beings who had not been the subject of active worship for centuries. The extant versions of some of these poems (though by no means all) may well originate in the oral, pre-Christian past, and retain some evidence of their function in the society that originally produced them, as previously discussed. The Codex Regius manuscript of the Poetic Edda has no preliminary disclaimer like Snorri's *Prologue* or *Skáldskaparmál* to explain why such material should be of interest to a Christian medieval audience and the scant clues that it does provide about its function have to be deduced from the nature of the compilation itself: the selection and ordering of the poems; sporadic passages of prose commentary that may have been added by the compiler; and so on. Chapters IV and VI show how among the mythological poems of both the Codex Regius collection and AM 748 I 4to, the didactic mode is dominant.

While the world to which many of the eddic poems claimed to bear witness had long since passed away, they nevertheless retained value not only as repositories of factual information about the world as it was (or as it was understood to be) but also about the world and human society in the composers' and copiers' present. Precepts for behaviour feature throughout, although the largest concentration by far occurs in *Hávamál*, which I will examine more closely as a special case at the end of this chapter. Carolyne Larrington has observed that *Hávamál* 'would have spoken to

the anxious men and women of the Sturlung Age with the same relevance as when it was first put into metrical form'.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, the narrative frames of the other wisdom poems in the Codex Regius in general, although varying in complexity, are certainly all more developed than the monologues and colloquies recited by archetypal wise men that otherwise feature commonly in medieval wisdom literature. These narratives are generally preoccupied with exploring the source of the information the poems convey and its potential use as well as providing entertaining mnemonics. The potential for human beings to learn from these paradigms of behaviour is made more explicit by the narrative frame of *Grímnismál*: one of the few mythological poems in which human characters do actually figure, and in which wisdom is successfully extracted from Óðinn to the benefit of one man and the doom of another. This relies on the apparently unproblematic ability of the divine to act in the human realm. Descriptions of human action in the explicitly mythological sphere are for the most part confined to the dead in the afterlife.<sup>14</sup> Yet some figures, like the valkyries and the enigmatic Völundr manage to lead a dual existence as both human and supernatural beings.

Strong parallels between human and divine nature are suggested not only in the narratives of the Poetic Edda, but also by the vocabulary used to refer to different types of being. Many of the words used for men in these poems do not necessarily refer to human beings exclusively and appear to apply unproblematically to other types of creatures. Essential similarities between men and certain supernatural beings such as elves and gods or *æsir* have recently been traced by Alaric Hall, and share many parallels across the Germanic-speaking world and beyond.<sup>15</sup> This is true of the vocabulary used for female mythological beings as well. While the range of terms attested for them in eddic poetry is relatively limited, they fall into the same broad patterns as the words for men, as generic terms apply equally to different types of women. In *För Skírnis*, the giantess the god longs for is a *mær* and a *man*. The fact that the resistance of Freyr's suit is based on tribal affiliations must be worked out through references to their respective social identities: Gerðr is the *mær Gymis*, a

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<sup>13</sup> Larrington, *Store of Common Sense*, p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> See especially the eddic memorial lays *Eirkm* and *Hákm* (both in *Eddica Minora*, ed. Heusler and Ranisch).

<sup>15</sup> Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*, esp. pp. 49–50.

giant, and Freyr expects that ‘ása oc álfa þat vill engi maðr, at við sát t sé m’.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, however, the ability of the gods to assert their will over external forces is once again confirmed, but this outcome is only achieved through threats of a magically potent curse. That the same terminology extends to goddesses is demonstrated by a reference to Freyja as *Óðs mæ r* in *Völuspá*.<sup>17</sup>

The flexibility of this type of vocabulary is most evident from the word *maðr* itself, which occurs most commonly in gnomic statements and elsewhere with the impersonal function of ‘one’ (although it means ‘man’ as well, translating it this way can be misleading and *menn* in the plural is used to refer to people in the non-gendered sense). It is clearly used in this way to refer to gods as well as men. Thus in *För Skírnis*, Freyr declares his feelings for Gerðr exceed those of *manni hveim, ungom*,<sup>18</sup> before him, and in *Hyndluljóð*, Heimdallr is described as a *naðgöfgan mann*.<sup>19</sup> This encompassing sense of the word is most in evidence in a couple of stanzas from *Grímnismál* and *Sigrdrífumál* that contrast humans with other kinds of beings in which they are called *mennzcir menn* for the sake of clarity.<sup>20</sup>

This wider meaning is also evident in a number of words used synonymously with *maðr*, which are similarly applied to non-human beings in the Poetic Edda. *Halr*, another term that occurs in gnomic pronouncements, is used in *Hymisqviða* by the giant Ægir in his description of Þórr as an *orðbæginn halr*.<sup>21</sup> Óðinn too aligns himself with *halar* in *Hávamál* when he quotes a maxim about the relationship between men and women:

Morg er góð mæ r, ef gorva kannar,  
hugbrigð við hali;<sup>22</sup>

He then exemplifies it with an episode from his own experience:

þá ec þat reynda, er iþ ráðspaca

<sup>16</sup> ‘No man of the Æsir or elves desires that they should be together’. *Fsk* v. 7 ll. 4–6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 70; and transl. Larrington, p. 62).

<sup>17</sup> *Vsp* v. 25 l. 8 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 6; and transl. Larrington, p. 7).

<sup>18</sup> ‘Any man, young’. *Fsk* v. 7 ll. 2–3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 70; and transl. Larrington, p. 62).

<sup>19</sup> ‘Spear-magnificent man’. *Hynd* v. 35 l. 6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 294; and transl. Larrington, p. 258). The reading of these words is not completely clear, and it can be interpreted in a number of ways: von See *et al.*, *Kommentar* III, 792–5.

<sup>20</sup> *Grí* v. 31 l. 6 and *Sigrdr* v. 18 l. 8 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 63 and 193; and transl. Larrington, pp. 56 and 169).

<sup>21</sup> ‘Contentious man’. *Hsq* v. 3 l. 2, (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 88; and transl. Larrington, p. 78).

<sup>22</sup> ‘Many a good girl when you know her better is fickle of heart towards men’. *Háv* v. 102 ll. 1–3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 32; and transl. Larrington, p. 28).

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teygða ec á flærðir flióð.<sup>23</sup>

The woman here is Billing's girl; most likely a giantess.<sup>24</sup> This reference to her illustrates the gnomic observations about the falseness of both sexes in love, and demonstrates an underlying acceptance that the relationships between genders are fundamentally the same for different types of beings.

The applications of the word *seggr* are similar to those of *halr*. In *Völundarqviða* it is used separately to refer to human men and to Völundr himself,<sup>25</sup> who is also called *vísi álfa*.<sup>26</sup> In one case *seggr* is possibly used collectively to refer to both men and supernatural beings. Frigg puts a stop to the exchange of insults between Loki and Óðinn in *Lokasenna* when they begin to reveal information that is too damaging by saying that their deeds should not be spoken of before *seggiom*.<sup>27</sup> In its immediate context, this could refer to the assembled gods but it might also refer to the human audience of the poem.

Elsewhere in *Lokasenna* another common word for men, *öld*, refers specifically to the Æsir. When Loki arrives uninvited at their feast, Bragi confronts him and declares that the Æsir know *hveim þeir alda* they should invite to their feast.<sup>28</sup> Later in the poem, Heimdallr warns Loki against drunkenness with a gnome that would not be out of place in *Hávamál* or *Sigrdrífumál*.

Þvíat ofdryccia veldr alda hveim,  
er sína mælgj né manað.<sup>29</sup>

There is no sense that the phrasing of this precept should prevent it from being applied to a god, whose divine nature does not shield him from the consequences of over-imbibing. The gods are accused of and admit to all kinds of human weaknesses and taboos in the course of the poem, and would perhaps benefit from *Hávamál*'s wisdom as much as any human audience. Stanzas 12, 13 and 14 of *Hávamál* all use

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<sup>23</sup> 'I found that out when I tried to seduce that sagacious woman into shame'. *Háv* v. 102 ll. 4–6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 32; and transl. Larrington, p. 28).

<sup>24</sup> She could also conceivably be a dwarf: Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, pp. 79–80; and McKinnell, 'Hávamál B', pp. 99–105. On this stanza and the general issue of gender relations in *Háv*, see Dronke, *Poetic Edda* III, 41–3.

<sup>25</sup> *Vldq* v. 6 l. 5, v. 7 l. 8 and v. 23 l. 2 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 118 and 121; and transl. Larrington, pp. 103 and 106).

<sup>26</sup> 'Prince of elves'. *Vldq* v. 32 l. 2 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 122; and transl. Larrington, p. 107).

<sup>27</sup> *Lok* v. 25 l. 3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 101; and transl. Larrington, p. 89).

<sup>28</sup> 'Which men'. *Lok* v. 8 l. 5 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 98; and transl. Larrington, p. 86).

<sup>29</sup> 'For too much drinking makes every man not keep his talkativeness in check'. *Lok* v. 47 ll. 4–6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 105; and transl. Larrington, p. 92).

the word *gumi* for those who should avoid drunkenness.<sup>30</sup> It occurs relatively infrequently outside of *Hávamál* in the Poetic Edda and is never directly applied to a non-human character, but there are instances in which it has an indefinite function similar to that of *maðr*. Rather than setting up a dichotomy between standards of behaviour for divine and human characters, perhaps Óðinn means to boast that he in particular is able to function above this advice.<sup>31</sup> Another possibly ambiguous usage occurs in stanza 26 of *För Skírnis*. Skírnir threatens Gerðr, saying :

þar scaltu ganga, er þic gumna synir  
síðan æva sé.<sup>32</sup>

Her removal to *hel*, worded very similarly to other death threats, separates her not just from men but from the living more generally. Even if it is men as such that are meant, the repeated use of this and other similar formulae with reference to supernatural beings as well as human characters underlines their common mortality.

This is also evident from the use of another word commonly used for mankind, *firar*, whose prototypical meaning is something like ‘living beings’. It is used to refer collectively to Þórr and his human servant Þjálfi, for example, in *Þórsdrápa*.<sup>33</sup> In the opening stanza of *Völuspá*, the *völva* asks for attention as she relates *forn spiðll fira*,<sup>34</sup> and then goes on to begin her account with her first memories among the giants, well before the advent of man. The use of *firar* in *Alvíssmál* is particularly interesting, as in a listing poem such as this words for different kinds of beings must have been at the forefront of the poet’s mind. The lists of poetic vocabulary for various natural features and phenomena contained in this poem are ordered according to the various types of creatures said to employ them. When Þórr first addresses *Alvíss*, he asks *hvat er þat fira* who seems to him *þursa líki*.<sup>35</sup> In his reply *Alvíss* reveals his name and confirms that he is a dwarf. Þórr then goes on to quiz him about poetic *heiti* because, he says, *Alvíss* knows about all kinds

<sup>30</sup> *Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 19.

<sup>31</sup> See Quinn, ‘Liquid Knowledge’, pp. 196–9.

<sup>32</sup> ‘There you shall go, where the sons of men will never see you again’. *Fsk* v. 26 ll. 4–6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 74; and transl. Larrington, p. 65).

<sup>33</sup> Eilífr Goðrúnarson, *Þdr* v. 82 l. 2; cf. Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 18 (ed. Faulkes I, 28; and transl. Faulkes, p. 84).

<sup>34</sup> ‘Ancient histories of the living’. *Vsp* v. 1 l. 7 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 1; and transl. adapted from Larrington, p. 4).

<sup>35</sup> ‘What sort of man is that’; and ‘in the likeness on an ogre’. *Alv* v. 2 ll. 1 and 4 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 124; and transl. Larrington, p. 109). Interpretation of this passage is discussed in von See *et al.*, *Kommentar* III, 300.

of *firar*, those who live *heimi hveriom í*.<sup>36</sup> The wisdom that the dwarf *Alvíss* then rattles off to impress *Pórr* takes the form of lists of *heiti* paired with the category of creature to which they are ascribed.

The one exception to this pattern in *Alvíssmál* occurs in stanzas 14, 18, 20, 26, 32 and 34, which also include a line identifying a word with the language of a place, rather than the types of beings that inhabit it. The poetic synonyms in these lines all alliterate with *hel*. The composition of the lists is not completely regular and while variation appears to be the ideal, repetition is allowed for the sake of the alliteration. Thus *menn* and *halir* are used in the same stanza (28), as are *Æsir* and *upregin* (10).<sup>37</sup> Though it is apparently acceptable, *halir* is, however, only used once. The apposition of those who live in *hel* with the various types of creatures living in other worlds thus appears to be deliberate. Their characterization as dead can be taken as an identification as fundamental as the racial identifications of living creatures. Unlike other beings, they are defined above all by their cosmological location. The word *hel* is used almost invariably in eddic poetry to denote the place rather than the mythological figure, although this sense is well attested by early skaldic verse.<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, the distinction between the dead and the living appears to be more important in some ways than the distinctions between the racial classifications of beings. All are portrayed as geographically separate in *Alvíssmál*, but there are some indications elsewhere in the Poetic Edda that there is more difference between the living and the dead than among individual living beings.<sup>39</sup> The way the relationship between the different *heimar* in the mythological landscape is envisaged by the eddic poems is not entirely clear and is not necessarily consistent.<sup>40</sup> *Heimr* can simply have the sense of ‘home’ and is commonly compounded with the names of various classes of beings. The prophetess in *Völuspá* remembers nine *heimar*,<sup>41</sup> and the giant *Vafþrúðnir* accounts for his knowledge about the secrets of gods and giants by

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<sup>36</sup> ‘In each of the worlds’. *Alv* v. 9 l. 6 etc. (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 125; and transl. Larrington, p. 110).

<sup>37</sup> *Alv* v. 28 and v. 10 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 128 and 125; and transl. Larrington, p. 113 and 110).

<sup>38</sup> Abram, ‘Hel in Early Norse Poetry’.

<sup>39</sup> Winzeler, *Anthropology and Religion*, pp. 159–68 notes that death differs from most other major rites of passage or life crises in that it is universal and not optional, and may be sudden and unexpected.

<sup>40</sup> For full discussion see Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes* I, 50–6; and Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance among the Gods*, pp. 13–20.

<sup>41</sup> *Vsp* v. 2 l. 5 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 1; and transl. Larrington, p. 4).

claiming that he has been to all nine and beyond into Niflhel:<sup>42</sup> the portion of *hel* in which the dead reside. The use of the word *heimr* elsewhere in explicit or implicit contrast with *hel* lends support to the idea that the realm of the dead is something fundamentally separate from that of all living beings.

When Óðinn has need to consult the dead in *Baldrs draumar* to get information that he cannot otherwise access, he commands the *vǫlva* to tell him the news from *hel*, because he already knows what is happening in *heimi*.<sup>43</sup> This use of *heimr* on its own to refer to the world in which all the living dwell also occurs elsewhere. Brynhildr's instructions for her funeral are her final wish *í heimi* in *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*,<sup>44</sup> and to go from *heimi* is a common expression for dying. It is most often used, of course, with reference to human characters, but they alone do not populate *hel* and similar expressions can equally apply to other types of being. For example, in *For Skírnis*, Skírnir threatens the giantess Gerðr with a fate worse than death that will leave her 'horfa heimi ór, snugga heliar til',<sup>45</sup> and in *Lokasenna*, Þórr threatens to strike Loki with his hammer and send him *í hel* if he does not stop speaking.<sup>46</sup> Humans and supernatural beings all face death and many of the same conditions in life.

Among the divine, Óðinn appears to be unique in his wisdom, not least because of his ability to access sources normally beyond the reach of all living beings. He is able, for instance, to continue to exploit the counsel of the dead Mímir, by conversing with his disembodied head. The peculiarity of this ability is highlighted by those occasions on which he is called upon to act on behalf of others who need the information that the dead possess. The *vǫlva* of *Vǫluspá* begins her address with an invocation that *allar helgar kindir*,<sup>47</sup> should listen to what she has to say and the broad scope of her revelation does indeed encompass the fates of all. As the poem progresses, however, it becomes evident that it is Óðinn who has prompted her to

<sup>42</sup> *Vafþr* v. 43 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 53; and transl. Larrington, p. 47).

<sup>43</sup> *Bdr* v. 6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 278; and transl. Larrington, p. 244). For context see von See *et al.*, *Kommentar* III, 425–8.

<sup>44</sup> 'In the world'. *Sig sk* v. 65 l. 3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 217; and transl. Larrington, p. 190).

<sup>45</sup> 'Facing out of the world, hankering towards hell'. *FSk* v. 27 ll. 3–4 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 74; and transl. Larrington, p.65).

<sup>46</sup> *Lok* v. 63 l. 5 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 109).

<sup>47</sup> 'All the sacred people'. *Vsp* v. 1 ll. 1–2 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 1; and transl. Larrington, p. 4). The Codex Regius version omits *helgar*. On the significance of this see Quinn, 'Vǫluspá', p. 303, and 'Editing the Edda', pp. 79–80.

speak.<sup>48</sup> Despite the potential hostility of her position,<sup>49</sup> he manages to secure her cooperation with gifts and possibly the use of some magical ability, and once she finishes her prophesy she *mun sǫcqvaz*.<sup>50</sup>

The parallels between this narrative and *Baldrs draumar* suggest the ability to consult the dead may be particular to Óðinn, a point I will return to in Chapter IV. Here too he is dispatched on behalf of the larger group when *Æsir allir* meet in council.<sup>51</sup> In this case he is also aided by the physical ability to reach *hel* (and its knowledge), which his possession of the supernaturally gifted steed Sleipnir apparently affords him. The significance of this detail is underlined by Snorri's account of Baldr's death in *Gylfaginning*,<sup>52</sup> which claims that Hermóðr was lent Sleipnir when he volunteered to undertake the journey to *hel* in order to secure Baldr's release. Serious obstacles are alluded to as Óðinn rides into *hel*: as he passes a bloody dog, he is described as the *Galdrs fǫður*.<sup>53</sup> The challenges continue once he has reached *hel* and he must draw on all his skill to extract the desired information; first he must locate her grave, then raise her with the use of a *valgaldr*,<sup>54</sup> and finally employ the sort of deceit typical of his wisdom contests in order to secure her cooperation. Like so many others, she does not recognize the pseudonyms he gives and reluctantly proceeds to answer his questions.

The realm of the dead, physically distanced from the living and sometimes associated with the hostile forces of the giants,<sup>55</sup> is clearly associated in Old Norse mythology with the most valuable wisdom. Óðinn's particular ability to access it thus undoubtedly does much to increase his own status as a figure from whom wisdom may be sought. This ability comes at the price of extraordinary and potentially compromising sacrifices on his part. The most extreme example is only referred to in the mysterious stanza 138 of *Hávamál*. Here Óðinn prefaces a boasting account of his

<sup>48</sup> Dronke notes that her use of the plural verbs in stanza 28 demonstrates her awareness that he asks on behalf of all of the gods, even as she addresses Óðinn by name and as *þú*. Dronke, *Poetic Edda* I, 51.

<sup>49</sup> Quinn, 'Dialogue with a *Vǫlva*', pp. 160–2.

<sup>50</sup> 'Will sink down'. *Vsp* v. 66 l. 8 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 15; and transl. Larrington, p. 13).

<sup>51</sup> 'All the *Æsir*'. *Bdr* v. 1 ll. 1–2 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 277; and transl. Larrington, p. 243).

<sup>52</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Gylf*, ch. 49 (ed. Faulkes, pp. 45–48; and transl. Faulkes, pp. 48–51). On the priority of different versions of this tale or motif, see von See *et al.*, *Kommentar* III, 379.

<sup>53</sup> 'Father of magic [spells]'. *Bdr* v. 3 l. 3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 277; and transl. Larrington, p. 243).

<sup>54</sup> 'Corpse-reviving spell'. *Bdr* v. 4 l. 6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 277; and transl. Larrington, p. 243).

<sup>55</sup> This is not to say that the giants are to be identified with the dead but that they (along with the dwarves in particular) have functions that bring them within the same semantic field: Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes* I, 247–56.

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most precious wisdom with the tale of how he acquired it hanging, wounded by a spear,

... oc gefinn Óðni  
siálfr siálfom mér,  
þeim meiði, er mangi veit,  
hvers hann af rótom renn.<sup>56</sup>

While there is debate about how exactly this scene should be interpreted, the description of the tree strongly implies that it is Yggdrasill and that the knowledge he gains is located in the underworld.<sup>57</sup> This tendency to resort to extreme measures in order to attain otherwise inaccessible wisdom is mocked by the *vǫlva* in *Vǫluspá*, who reveals that she is aware that he has previously sacrificed his own eye at the well of Mímir in order to gain knowledge. Although he is not omniscient, Óðinn can offer something that goes beyond the commonplace, even though not all can succeed in grasping it and the effort entails great risk.

Several of the frame narratives of the wisdom poems play on this idea that not all participants in the scene or indeed members of the audience will benefit equally from wisdom revelation. What sets them apart, however, is not their divine or human natures but their own intellectual engagement and ability to interpret what they hear correctly. Lars Lönnroth's concept of the 'double scene' is useful here for explaining exactly how the context of wisdom revelation in the poems and the context of the poems' actual performance relate to one another. He observes that eddic poetry frequently makes use of settings, such as a hall, that – while fantastic and even supernatural in their poetic context – are readily analogous to the scenes in which the oral performance of poetry was likely to have taken place. One of the most popular motifs he identifies, and a favourite in the wisdom poems, is what he terms the Ulysses or Widsith Motif, which involves Óðinn or a great hero arriving in disguise as a wanderer.<sup>58</sup> This has the advantage of inviting the audience to identify the performer with the traveller and to create a context for didacticism that grants it mythic significance, by placing the scene at hand into the context of greater mythological or legendary narrative.<sup>59</sup> The fundamental similarities between the

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<sup>56</sup> 'And dedicated to Odin, myself to myself, on that tree of which no man knows from where its roots run'. *Hávam* v. 138 ll. 5–9 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 40; and transl. Larrington, p. 34).

<sup>57</sup> For a recent re-evaluation of this topic and a survey of earlier discussion, see Schjødt, *Initiation between Two Worlds*, p. 178.

<sup>58</sup> Lönnroth, 'Double Scene', pp. 95–7.

<sup>59</sup> Lönnroth, 'Hjálmar's Death-Song', p. 8.

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worlds of all living beings are an essential part of what allows these poems to function so effectively, by allowing the possibility that man can attain the heights of Óðinn's divine wisdom.

#### *The treatment of mythological figures in skaldic diction*

The other main source for poetic conceptions of mythological figures, especially the gods, and their relationship to mankind is the language of skaldic diction. Here mythological references abound, even as the actual subject matter is rarely mythological as such. It is uncertain whether skaldic poetry on mythological subjects was ever composed on a large scale.<sup>60</sup> Even the shield poems, which are dominated by mythological narratives, take the human world as their starting point. This is not to say that skaldic verse is necessarily historical, nor that the version of reality it presents could be any less mythological than the obviously fantastic world of eddic verse. But the impetus for skaldic poetic composition in each case is a human being, or the experiences of a human being. Yet the implicit mythological context of all skaldic poetry is never far from the surface, even in some clearly Christian poems. In the very act of composition poets align themselves with Óðinn in the myth of the acquisition of the mead of poetry.<sup>61</sup> The human experience is then either explored, elevated, examined or even mocked by casting it against the backdrop of the mythological realm. This presented a heightened version of reality, but, as the language of eddic poetry shows, one not so far removed from that of mankind and also one that was in essence governed by the same constraints. This equivalence was reinforced metaphorically by the structure of the kennings themselves, just as the interchangeability of base-words encouraged comparisons.

Thus in some ways the evidence of skaldic poetry is more promising in what it can reveal about how conceptions of human and supernatural beings were related than that of eddic verse; but it is also significantly more limited. Sustained mythological narratives in skaldic composition may have been relatively rare to begin with, and

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<sup>60</sup> On the potentially contradictory evidence of poems which invoke Þórr (mostly for the purpose of slaying enemies), see Lindow, 'Addressing Thor'.

<sup>61</sup> Skalds themselves often played on the mythological metaphor of the mead of poetry: see Clover, 'Skaldic Sensibility', esp. pp. 68–75; Frank, 'Snorri and the Mead of Poetry'; and more generally Quinn, 'Liquid Knowledge'; and Clunies Ross, *History of Old Norse*, esp. pp. 69–82. On the broader associations of the consumption of knowledge see Kövecses, *Metaphor*, pp. 72–3.

have certainly been preserved in small quantity. Datable pre-Christian poems with extensive interest in mythology as the basis of religious belief are difficult to identify and, like *Vellekla*, can be very hard to interpret. Our frame of reference, moreover, for interpreting this poetics is based on the treatises of the late medieval period, and above all those of Snorri Sturluson. As with the eddic material, the way we understand skaldic diction reveals both an evolving world-view and the way it was ultimately synthesized by the generations responsible for recording it.

Snorri's own understanding of the pre-Christian conception of the world was shaped by versions of a number of surviving (and a few lost) eddic poems as well as skaldic poetry and the learned European thinking of his own time. He quotes and paraphrases eddic poetry extensively in *Gylfaginning* and his own choice of language in retelling myths throughout the Edda is clearly influenced by it. The conception of mythological figures as having essentially human natures would have squared well with the unique brand of euhemerization laid out in the *Prologue*. The *Æsir* and the *Vanir* are *menn* and *folk*.<sup>62</sup> Kvasir is said to have travelled throughout *heim* teaching and his sojourn among *mǫnnum* led him ultimately to the dwarves who killed him.<sup>63</sup> The word *maðr* here seems to mean something like 'sentient being': Geirrǫðr, we are told, could discern by looking into the eyes of Loki disguised as a bird that *maðr mundi vera*.<sup>64</sup> That said, there are certainly a number of ways in which Snorri's views may have led to what we would consider a distorted view of his native poetics, at odds with the very evidence he presents.

This is true not least of the ordering of Snorri's account of poetic language in *Skáldskaparmál*, which, at least as it begins, is hierarchical. The gods, beginning with the *Alföður*,<sup>65</sup> get first consideration and a variety of kenning types are exemplified, with the greatest number of examples being reserved for those Snorri views as the principal players. Óðinn, in his role as patron of poetry and supreme god, is the subject of the most extensive list of quoted examples, but the commentary accompanying them is accordingly minimal. More telling of the way in which Snorri conceives of the categorization of kennings is his summary treatment of the other divine figures. Most lists include family relationships, roles in mythological

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<sup>62</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. G56–7 (ed. Faulkes I, 2–3; and transl. Faulkes, pp. 59–60).

<sup>63</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. G57 (ed. Faulkes I, 3; and transl. Faulkes, pp. 61–2).

<sup>64</sup> 'It must be a person'. Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 18 (ed. Faulkes I, 24; and transl. Faulkes, p. 81).

<sup>65</sup> 'All-father'. Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 2 (ed. Faulkes I, 6; and transl. Faulkes, p. 66). The interpretation of this name has been debated: see Doolan, 'Mutability of Óðinn', Appendix, pp. ix–lxii.

narratives and in some cases characteristic possessions or social roles. He also states at the start that all of them, as well as the elves,<sup>66</sup> can be referred to by the name of another, modified by a deed or attribute of the one intended.<sup>67</sup>

In þriðja málsgrein er kǫlluð er kenning, ok <er> sú grein svá sett at vér kǫllum Óðin eða Þór eða Tý eða einnhvern af Ásum eða álfum, at hvern þeira er ek nefni til, þá tek ek með heiti af eign annars Ássins eða get ek hans verka nokkvorra.<sup>68</sup>

The phrasing here probably has more to do with the alliterative pair *Ásum eða álfum* than any intention to differentiate categories of mythological beings.<sup>69</sup> Indeed most other types of mythological creatures are discussed incidentally as they occur rather than given as the subjects of devoted lists.

In Snorri's scheme, poetic references to the gods are implied to be paradigmatic of those available for all living beings, and it is assumed that the subject matter of skaldic composition is predominantly human beings. The few skaldic mythological narratives which he quotes are anchored to the human world by their historical contexts. Human and supernatural referents are further linked by the animate principle that Margaret Clunies Ross has identified as the dominant criterion for the ordering of Snorri's lists in *Skáldskaparmál*.<sup>70</sup> When poetic expressions for *maðr* are discussed as such,<sup>71</sup> it is in order to elaborate on how the system already presented can be used rather than to lay out an alternative system for human subjects.<sup>72</sup> Thus, Snorri repeats that circumlocutions for men can be based on family relationships, possessions, actions and the names of *Æsir*.<sup>73</sup> He adds that the names of

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<sup>66</sup> For the latest discussion of elves in Old Norse and related literatures, see Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*, esp. pp. 21–53.

<sup>67</sup> As Margaret Clunies Ross (*Skáldskaparmál*, pp. 97–102) has observed, however, this is one of several areas in which Snorri's rationalization of the kenning system and the evidence of his own examples are somewhat at odds.

<sup>68</sup> 'The third category of language is what is called kenning [description], and this category is constructed in this way, that we speak of Odin or Thor or Tyr or one of the *Æsir* or elves, in such a way that with each of those that I mention, I add a term for the attributes of another *As* or make mention of one or other of his deeds'. Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 1 (ed. Faulkes, p. 5; and transl. Faulkes, *Edda*, p. 64).

<sup>69</sup> See Thorvaldsen, "'Svá er sagt í fornum vísindum'", p. 270.

<sup>70</sup> See especially Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 55–75 (ed. Faulkes I, 83–117; and transl. Faulkes, pp. 133–64).

<sup>71</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 31 (ed. Faulkes I, 40; and transl. Faulkes, p. 94).

<sup>72</sup> The only major difference is that human referents are common nouns, whereas divine referents are proper nouns (Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 64 (ed. Faulkes I, 103–4; and transl. Faulkes, pp. 148–9)).

<sup>73</sup> 'Hann skal kenna við verk sín, þat er hann veitir eða þiggr eða gerir. Hann má ok kenna til eignar sinnar þeirar er hann á ok svá ef hann gaf, svá ok við ættir þær er hann kom af, svá þær er frá honum kómu ... mann er ok rétt at kenna til allra Ása heita' ('How shall a man be referred to? He shall be referred to by his actions, what he gives or receives or does. He can also be referred to by his property, what he owns and also if he gives it away; also by the family lines he is descended from, also those that

giants and elves are also acceptable in order to show how this kind of naming can be used to convey the positive or negative associations of a character. At this point the widespread characterization of humans as trees is explained by means of a rather far-fetched etymology based on the practice of referring to a man in terms of animate base-words in order to incorporate this common type into Snorri's categories of acceptable base-word types.<sup>74</sup>

These elaborations do not serve to delineate distinct poetic expressions for human and divine characters, and a number of the examples quoted throughout *Skáldskaparmál* show that their use is not limited to human referents. Thus a verse ascribed to Úlfr Uggason envisages the scene of Baldr's funeral where valkyries and ravens are with a *sigrunni svinnum*.<sup>75</sup> A compound like *sigrunnr* would most commonly refer to a human warrior, but taken together the characterization of the man as *svinnr* and the nature of his company indicates that the individual meant is Óðinn. The same poet also refers to Óðinn as a *kynfróðr hrafnfreistaðr*,<sup>76</sup> again deliberately playing on the ambiguity of skaldic language in order to convey the most significant instance of a common scene. The *hrafnfreistaðr* or even *fróðr hrafnfreistaðr* could be any father, but there is additional *kyn* in this *minni* because he is Óðinn at Baldr's funeral.<sup>77</sup> Context, in all cases, was crucial. The close alliance in the mythology between gods and men can also lead to cases where ambiguities caused by semantic overlap are at least tolerated, and sometimes perhaps intended, as may be the case in *Haustlǫng*, for example, when the giant Hrungr is called the *sólginn manna dólgr*.<sup>78</sup> The giants are ultimately the enemies of mankind as well as the gods, and the firmly mythological context here supports a reading of the divine characters

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have descended from him ... it is also normal to refer to a man using all the names of the Æsir'). Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 31 (ed. Faulkes I, 40; and transl. Faulkes, p. 94).

<sup>74</sup> 'Ok fyrir því at hann er reynir vápnanna ok viðr víganna—alt eitt ok vinnandi; viðr heitir ok tré, reynir heitir tré—af þessum heitum hafa skáldin kallað menn ask eða hlyn, lund eða ǫðrum viðar heitum karlkendum' ('And because he is a trier of the weapons and doer of the killings, which is the same thing as achiever – *vidr* is also a word for tree, there is a tree called *reynir* [rowan] – on the basis of these terms poets have called men ash or maple, *lund* [grove, tree] or other masculine tree-names'). Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 31 (ed. Faulkes I, 40; and transl. Faulkes, p. 94). For further discussion, see Clunies Ross, *Skáldskaparmál*, pp. 108–10.

<sup>75</sup> 'Wise victory-bush'. Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 2 (v. 14 l. 1) (ed. Faulkes I, 9; and transl. Faulkes, p. 68). This quotation is not included in the Codex Upsaliensis.

<sup>76</sup> 'Strangely wise raven-tester'. Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 2 (v. 19 l. 2–3) (ed. Faulkes I, 10; and transl. Faulkes, p. 68).

<sup>77</sup> 'Wonder'; and 'memorial'. Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 2 (v. 14 l. 4) (ed. Faulkes I, 9; and transl. Faulkes, p. 68).

<sup>78</sup> 'Voracious enemy of men'. Þjóðólfr inn hvinverski, *Hlg* v. 16 ll. 2 and 4 (*Skj* BI, 17); cf. Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 17 (v. 67 ll. 2–4) (ed. Faulkes I, 23; and transl. Faulkes, p. 80).

as the representations of the joint interests of men and gods in the face of the giant threat.

There is some overlap too between the poetic terminology assigned to human and giant males. Within mythological skaldic narratives in which gods and giants fight, both sides are described with the types of kennings commonly applied to human warriors. In *Þórsdrápa*, Geirrþōðr is a *hraðskyndir gunnar* and Þórr an *álmtaugar ægir*.<sup>79</sup> Beyond this, Þórr is defined by his allegiances to *ættir Jólnir* and *ýta*, while the giant's nature has more narrow associations. *Litla Skálda* confirms that a bad man should be described with the names of giants, which are included in the 'allra illra kvikvenda nöfnum karlkendra'.<sup>80</sup> Equally, giants and dwarves may be called by the names of *þjóða öllum* and *sækonunga*, when modified by an expression of their association with mountains and stones.<sup>81</sup> Such kennings are extremely common in the mythological narrative skaldic poems in which giants feature significantly. *Haustlǫng* refers to them individually as *hraundrengr* and *grundar gramr* and collectively as *berg-Dana*,<sup>82</sup> and *Þórsdrápa* uses, amongst other names for giants, *Skotar Gandvíkr*, *hellis Kumra* and *flóðrifs Danir*.<sup>83</sup> The sense is that giants, like different tribal groups, are a particular type of men, in this case defined by their affiliations with the more hostile elements of nature. In the same way they can be referred to as gods as long as similar qualifications apply, as in the kenning *bönd setbergs*.<sup>84</sup>

Thus skaldic diction for different categories of supernatural and human beings exploited fundamental similarities between them in order to project the mythological world onto the human realm of poets and their subjects – and, in a few cases, *vice versa*. The strength of these correspondences was reflected by the use of vocabulary and kennings that linked the supernatural with human society and behaviour. Skaldic poetics took full advantage of this latitude in determining referents in order to create metaphorical associations between normally discrete categories. In short, in the gritty

<sup>79</sup> 'Terrifier of bowstrings'; and 'swift-hastener of battle'. Eilífr Goðrúnarson, *Þdr* v. 18 ll. 1–2 and v. 16 l. 5 (*Skj* BI, 139 and 142); cf. Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 18 (v. 88 ll. 1–2 and v. 87 l. 5) (ed. Faulkes I, 29; and transl. Faulkes, p. 85).

<sup>80</sup> 'Names of all the evil masculine living creatures'. Snorri Sturluson, *LSk (Edda)*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 257).

<sup>81</sup> 'All peoples'; and 'sea-kings'. Snorri Sturluson, *LSk (Edda)*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 255).

<sup>82</sup> 'Rock warrior'; 'prince of the earth'; and 'rock Danes'. Þjóðólfr inn hvinverski, *Hlg* vv. 17–18 (*Skj* BI, 18); cf. Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 17 (vv. 68–9) (ed. Faulkes I, 23).

<sup>83</sup> 'Scots of Gandvik'; 'Cumbrians of the cave'; and 'Danes of the sea-rib (rock)'. Eilífr Goðrúnarson, *Þdr* vv. 2 and 12–13 (*Skj* BI, 139 and 142).

<sup>84</sup> 'Gods of the seat-rock'. Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 52 (v. 268 ll. 1 and 4) (ed. Faulkes I, 76; and transl. Faulkes, p. 126).

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world of skaldic poetry men were *menn*, but so were many other beings too. Sorting the *menn* from the *æsir*, *vanir*, *álfar* and others needed leaps of poetic inspiration, which opened new vistas for ontological and artful obfuscation.

#### *The treatment of the Christian God in skaldic diction*

The question of how Christ ought to be referred to in skaldic diction is not taken up until well into *Skáldskaparmál*, although plenty of Christian examples are offered in connection with other points of interest.<sup>85</sup> Snorri concentrates in particular on the theoretical problems that the relevant kennings raise: he notes that ‘þar koma saman kenningar’,<sup>86</sup> as kennings for Christ are based on those for a king, and interpreters must rely on the context to work out the referent the poet intends. There is potential for confusion when describing the subjects of a king both in terms of their nature, as when he is *stillir aldar*,<sup>87</sup> and their geographical location, as when he is *konungr Róms*.<sup>88</sup>

The other main category of Christ kennings, which uses verbal nouns as base words to refer to His deeds, also echoes the vernacular terminology commonly used for human rulers, the conventional terms for the divinity derived from Latin and in some cases clearly refer to His role in Christian belief. The dominant metaphor this language invokes is Christ, or God, as an exalted version of the temporal ruler whose praise is so often the subject of skaldic poetry.<sup>89</sup> This has the advantage not only of tapping into a well-developed aspect of skaldic tradition, but also of allowing poets to avoid semantic associations with the pre-Christian divine to an impressive degree.

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<sup>85</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross (*Skáldskaparmál*, pp. 93–4) notes this deviation from the general division of animate and inanimate referents. She suggests that Snorri’s ordering may be designed to draw attention to the potential for Christian poets to make use of old kenning types for Christian referents and the anticipation of some Christian beliefs in pagan religion.

<sup>86</sup> ‘There the kennings overlap’. Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 53 (ed. Faulkes I, 78; and transl. Faulkes, p. 129).

<sup>87</sup> ‘Ruler of men’. Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 52 (v. 268 ll. 3–4) (ed. Faulkes I, 76; and transl. Faulkes, p. 126).

<sup>88</sup> ‘King of Rome’. Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 52 (v. 270 ll. 3–4) (ed. Faulkes I, 76–7; and transl. Faulkes, p. 126).

<sup>89</sup> See Weber, ‘Die Christus-Strophe des Eilífr Goðrúnarson’.

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A large number of the basewords in kennings or poetic *heiti* for God or Christ<sup>90</sup> attested in skaldic poetry are also used very commonly for human men both in secular and overtly religious skaldic and eddic poetry. These include numerous terms for ‘prince’ or ‘ruler’, such as *deilir*,<sup>91</sup> *dróttinn*, *fylkir*, *herra*, *hilmir*, *jöfurr*, *konungr*, *lofðungr*, *mildingr*, *ræsir*, *siklingr*, *skjöldungr*, *stillir*, *vísi* (or *vísir*), *þengill* and *öðlingr*.<sup>92</sup> There are also a number of analogous nouns that are specifically associated with the Christian divinity, and which either relate directly to Christian beliefs or derive from Latin expressions. God is thus also the *skapari*, a designation which doesn’t seem to have caught on for any particular members of the Æsir despite *Völuspá*’s account of their involvement in the formation of the world and the various races. Sometimes conventional expressions are modified to indicate that not just any ruler is meant. *Þjóðkonungr* is a well-attested compound in secular poetry and in both *Máriudrápa* and the *Drápa af Máriugrát* it becomes *yfirþjóðskonungr*.<sup>93</sup>

Semantic overlap between expressions for the Christian God and mythological characters, however, is much less common. This owes in part to the scarcity of nouns with a primary sense denoting social status which are applied to supernatural figures in eddic poetry. *Konungr*, for instance, is never used for an unambiguously non-human character. The one potential exception revolves around the interpretation of a mysterious allusion in *Helreið Brynhildar*.

Lét hami vára hugfullr konungr,  
átta systra, undir eic borit;  
var ec vetra tólf, ef þic vita lystir,  
er ec ungom gram eiða seldac.<sup>94</sup>

This stanza forms the very beginning of Brynhildr’s account of the events of her life leading up to her unhappy fate. In this context, the *konungr* is probably Óðinn (or her

<sup>90</sup> There is considerable overlap here and in some cases also with phrases referring to the Holy Spirit. See Clunies Ross, ‘Introduction’, pp. lviii–lx.

<sup>91</sup> This is used of both God the father and Christ, but is unusual for human kings. When it is used, it refers to him as a *vella deilir* (‘popular distributor’) of material wealth. *Nkt* v. 70 l. 8 (ed. and transl. Gade, p. 803).

<sup>92</sup> While in context, these terms are often best translated as simply ‘prince’ or ‘ruler’, many of them clearly relate to particular functions of ideal lordship, such as generosity, martial leadership and receiving praise.

<sup>93</sup> *Mdr* vv. 9, 18 and 27 (ed. and transl. Attwood, pp. 485–6, 494 and 500–1); *Mgr* vv. 28, 32 and 36 (ed. and transl. Gade, pp. 779, 781–2 and 784).

<sup>94</sup> ‘The wise king had our magic garments – eight sisters we were together – put under an oak; I was twelve years old, if you want to know, when I gave my promise to the young prince’. *Helr* v. 6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 220; and transl. Larrington, p. 193). On the interpretation of this stanza, see Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, p. 288; and von See *et al.*, *Kommentar* VI, 532–6.

father) and the events alluded to are the beginnings of her life as a valkyrie.<sup>95</sup> Otherwise, *konungr* generally applies as unambiguously to human characters as do the ruler words that occur more frequently in eddic poetry, such as *gramr* and *fylkir*. There are, of course, some exceptions: *Völuspá* names the *dverga dróttin* and speaks of the hall of *dyggvar dróttir* that the surviving *dróttir* will inhabit after *ragna rǫc*.<sup>96</sup> This second instance at least may represent a deliberate use of the word, together with *dyggr*, to convey the difference between these gods and their less worthy predecessors. The use of *drótt* and *dróttinn* in particular to convey the general nobility of supernatural characters is most common and never indicates absolute dominion over the gods or men. It is used repeatedly in *Prymsqviða* as part of the refrain *þursa dróttinn*,<sup>97</sup> which serves to characterize the giant as a fitting opponent for Þórr.

This is not to say that Christian skaldic poetry is devoid of mythological imagery rooted in the pagan past: a striking feature to which Margaret Clunies Ross has called attention.<sup>98</sup> Kennings for human characters especially make use of a wide range of mythological allusions.<sup>99</sup> Thus in *Harmsól*, a man is a *meiðr Hlakkar borðs* and even ‘Gautr hrynvengis mens grundar’.<sup>100</sup> Yet the types of basewords and *heiti* favoured for references to God and Christ do not strongly recall those used for pagan divinities. This owes in part to the general lack of kennings based on the relative social status of the gods, despite Snorri’s attempts to present a clear hierarchy. Snorri claims, for instance, that Frigg could be called *drottning Ása ok Ásynja*, but the sparse uses of the word in skaldic and eddic verse are uniformly reserved for human women and the Virgin Mary.<sup>101</sup>

The skaldic evidence is more complicated and paints a broadly similar but perhaps slightly more nuanced picture. Unsurprisingly, within a medium more overtly concerned with the highest echelons of human society, there is more emphasis

<sup>95</sup> It is also possible that the description of him as *hugfullr* (cf. La Farge and Tucker, *Glossary to the Poetic Edda*, s. v.) could be a further indication of his identity, but this would require an unusual interpretation of the compound, which generally has the sense ‘courageous’. See, for example, *Sigrdr* v. 31 l. 3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 196); *Berv* v. 4 l. 6 (ed. and transl. Gade, pp. 15–16); and *Magnkv* v. 7 l. 3 (ed. and transl. Gade, p. 421).

<sup>96</sup> ‘Lord of the dwarfs’; and ‘worthy lords’. *Vsp* v. 9 ll. 5–6 and v. 64 ll. 5–6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 2 and 15; and transl. Larrington, pp. 5 and 12).

<sup>97</sup> ‘Lord of ogres’. *Pry* v. 6 l. 2, v. 11 l. 4, v. 22 l. 2, v. 25 l. 2 and v. 30 l. 2 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 111–15; and transl. Larrington, pp. 97–101).

<sup>98</sup> Clunies Ross, *History of Old Norse*, pp. 120–5.

<sup>99</sup> See also Clunies Ross, ‘Introduction’, p. lvii.

<sup>100</sup> ‘Tree of Hlakkar’s shield’; and ‘Gautr of the ringing land of the necklace of earth’. *Has* v. 14 ll. 2–3 and v. 42 ll. 6–8 (ed. and transl. Attwood, pp. 86–7 and 109–110).

<sup>101</sup> See *Gðqf* v. 6 l. 2 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 203).

on the social status of the divine figures in the mythological realm who are held up as parallels for human rulers. Sometimes there is some coincidental semantic overlap between terms for Christian and pagan deities. Heimdallr, for example, is repeatedly referred to as a *vörðr*.<sup>102</sup> Every occurrence, however, limits this role to watchman of the gods and thus when Christ is designated the *vörðr* of heaven there can be no real confusion.<sup>103</sup> Similarly when the word *hirðir* appears occasionally in a mythological context, it carries none of the metaphorical associations which it has when applied to Christ. In some cases it is more difficult, however, to discern whether echoes of characteristically Christian language are intentional. Thus *Pórsdrápa* calls the titular god ‘god of the heavens’,<sup>104</sup> and in one stanza composed by the eleventh-century Icelandic skald Hofgarða-Refr Gestsson, Óðinn may be called *valdi* of the sky.<sup>105</sup>

For all that kennings for God are based on those for human rulers, the relationship between God and mankind is therefore very clearly drawn in skaldic poetry on Christian subjects. His position may be elevated, like that of a human king, but He is fundamentally distinct from the *guma kyn* by virtue of His divine nature. A number of poems play on this contrast between divine perfection and the failings of human nature as a structural feature. In these the poets map the vast differences that separate themselves and their audiences from God, and which ultimately require miraculous measures to bridge. The various means by which the human can approach the divine are examined in a number of poems. In Gamli kanóki’s *Harmsól*, for instance, the poet’s sins and inadequacies faced with divinity are enumerated at length,<sup>106</sup> while *Heilags anda drápa*, on the other hand, reveals how the Holy Spirit can help his children with *brauði skilningar*, which ‘lætr glöð kyn guma skynja guðdóms eðli föðu’.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>102</sup> See *Grí* v. 13 l. 4 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 60); *Skm* v. 28 l. 6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 75); and *Lok* v. 48 l. 6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 106).

<sup>103</sup> Most examples occur in kennings for God with *vörðr* as the baseword and a kenning for the sky or heaven as the determinant: see *Geisl* v. 19 (ed. and transl. Chase, pp. 22–3); *Has* vv. 5, 30 and 65 (ed. and transl. Attwood, pp. 77, 99 and 131–2); *Leið* v. 10 (ed. and transl. Attwood, pp. 149–50); and *Mv II* (ed. and transl. Gade, pp. 702–3). He is also *gumna vörðr* ‘guardian of men’ (*Has* v. 52 l. 7 (ed. and transl. Attwood, pp. 119–20)). There is, however, one instance in which confusion with a human ruler is possible: God is *fróns vörðr* ‘guardian of the land’ in *Líkn* v. 15 l. 3 (ed. and transl. Tate, p. 246), which, as Tate notes, belongs to a kenning-type otherwise applied exclusively to human rulers.

<sup>104</sup> ‘Himinsjóli’. Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 18 (v. 81 l. 3) (ed. Faulkes I, 27; and transl. Faulkes, p. 84).

<sup>105</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 2 (v. 17 l. 4) (ed. Faulkes I, 10; and transl. Faulkes, p. 68). For discussion of the meaning of *valdi*, see Faulkes, *Skáldskaparmál*, pp. 412 and 419.

<sup>106</sup> *Has* vv. 4, 7–9 and 12–16 (ed. and transl. Attwood, pp. 76, 78–82 and 84–8).

<sup>107</sup> ‘Bread of understanding’; and ‘allows the glad race of men to perceive the nature of the divinity of the father’. *Heildir* v. 4 ll. 7–8 (ed. and transl. Attwood, p. 454).

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When the generic terms for men that apply so unproblematically to mythological characters occur in this setting, they always denote humankind, separate from God himself, and, like the race of the angels, subject to him. Christ, who has been physically incarnate, and the Virgin Mary embody this hope most strongly, and it is unsurprising that most real semantic confusion of the human and supernatural in a Christian context is concentrated on these two figures. *Lilja* makes the most of the paradox of Christ's dual nature, viewing it as the key to mankind's reconciliation with God. The poem tells of how mankind initially fell into temptation when the serpent told Eve of the limitations of their own nature and promised that they could be made like *guðdóm*. The remedy for this original sin then comes when God is instead made like man and brought to his human subjects. Hence Christ, like other men, can be referred to in terms of his genetic relationships. Jesus is born to Mary as a *sveinn*,<sup>108</sup> a *barn* of Adam,<sup>109</sup> and the poet pauses to comment on the paradox by which he is both a *mann og guð* and Mary too becomes something supernatural: a *mær og móður*.<sup>110</sup> The stanza goes on to describe how in this moment heavenly glory was brought to earth and the usually separate and often twinned races of men and angels were also united. As the poem tells the story of Christ's life, the full extent of his human nature is reflected in the diction. He is called a *maðr* repeatedly, even an *ungr maðr*, the *menniligir sonr* of God and Mary.<sup>111</sup> Satan is said to be baffled by *sá maðr* who resists temptation when all others have succumbed. The language of the poem seeks to foreground the full humanity of Christ's nature in order to seek a way of relating to an otherwise unapproachable *allsvaldandi*.<sup>112</sup>

Mary's status as something between the human and divine is somewhat more complicated theologically, but indicated just as strongly by skaldic diction.<sup>113</sup> In *Máruðrápa* she is conceived of not only as the mother of Christ, the human man, but also of the *yfirðjóðkonungs* and even of the abstract nouns *gleði* and *mildi*.<sup>114</sup> Like

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<sup>108</sup> 'Boy'. *Heildir* v. 33 l. 2 (ed. and transl. Attwood, pp. 601–2).

<sup>109</sup> 'Child'. *Heildir* v. 64 l. 8 (ed. and transl. Attwood, pp. 635–6).

<sup>110</sup> 'Man and God'; and 'virgin and mother'. *Heildir* v. 34 ll. 3–4 (ed. and transl. Attwood, pp. 602–3).

<sup>111</sup> 'Young man'; and 'human son'. *Heildir* v. 36 l. 4 and v. 44. l. 2 (ed. and transl. Attwood, pp. 605–6 and 614).

<sup>112</sup> 'Almighty'. *Lil* v. 4 l. 8 (ed. and transl. Chase, pp. 566–7).

<sup>113</sup> For a sense of the types of kennings used for the Virgin Mary, see Wrightson, *Fourteenth-Century Icelandic Verse*, pp. 139–40.

<sup>114</sup> 'Gladness'; and 'Mercy'. *Mdr* v. 1 l. 1 (ed. and transl. Attwood, pp. 478–9).

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God, she is ruler (*dróttning*) of *heims* and *gotna* as well as of *himins* and *dýrðar*.<sup>115</sup> The poet explains how she can function thus with an interesting image of Mary as a vessel ‘þaðan flaut allr ilmr að ýtum ... allr guðs’.<sup>116</sup> Where kennings for Christ based on family relationships can serve to emphasize his humanity, those for Mary more often do the reverse. She is both *móðir* and *brúðr* or *víf* of God, whose divine aspect is stressed by accompanying kennings, just as her son, Jesus Christ, is the *dróttinn*, and the *gramr* and *hilmir* of heaven. By focusing on her close proximity to the divinity and her current state of glory, these references to the Virgin Mary indicate the possibility that human beings can rise above the imperfection of their current state.

The separation of mankind from its divine creator lies at the heart of the Christian religion and is reflected in the language of skaldic poetry. Terms for God may be based on those for human rulers, but it is always clear that He is ineluctably above them. When generic words for men occur they unambiguously reference his subjects, as opposed to God himself. The potential overlap caused by figures like Christ and the Virgin Mary is never allowed to cause confusion as poets often dwell, in kennings or other forms of description, on the nature of the paradox that allows them to function as part of the human race in one sense and entirely separate from it in another.

#### CASE-STUDY: HÁVAMÁL

##### *Arrangement and interpretation*

The terminology and cosmological perspectives explored in the unusually lengthy eddic poem *Hávamál* (which runs to 164 stanzas) merit special treatment, and are closely bound up with questions of the poem’s origins and nature. In essence it is a collection of advice and precepts concerned primarily with human behaviour, although the form and function of its expressions are varied and include sayings,

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<sup>115</sup> *Mdr* v. 3 l. 8, v. 5 l. 6, v. 9 l. 7 and v. 28 l. 2 (ed. and transl. Attwood, pp. 480–1, 482–3, 485–6 and 501–2).

<sup>116</sup> ‘From which spread all the perfume of God to men’. *Mdr* v. 10 ll. 5–6 (ed. and transl. Attwood, p. 486).

spells and advice as well as narrative interludes of varying length and complexity.<sup>117</sup> As I noted in Chapter II, this kind of direct social instruction is less common in Old Norse wisdom literature than we might expect from its analogues in other traditions. It is thus to *Hávamál* that scholars have historically looked for, as M. C. van den Toorn put it, the ‘ethical testimony of the Norsemen’.<sup>118</sup> Yet attempts to discern a coherent and consistent moral message in *Hávamál* have been problematic.<sup>119</sup> Further questions remain about how useful the poem’s advice is and what type or element of human society it could possibly be intended for. Does it present different standards of behaviour and, if so, do they correspond with different kinds of people or different types of beings?

Earlier scholars concluded that if *Hávamál* expressed a kind of ethics, it was primitive.<sup>120</sup> The Chadwicks, in their epic *Growth of Literature* written in the 1930s, concluded that while the poem was originally intended to be didactic, it had undergone considerable modification in oral tradition so that ‘as we now have it the object of the work would seem to be entertainment rather than instruction’.<sup>121</sup> They cited in particular the humorous, cynical elements of the poem, evident particularly in the two narrative digressions relating to Óðinn’s dealings with female characters. The only real virtue they could identify in the poem was caution and they consequently suggested that *Hávamál* places more stress ‘upon manners than morals’.<sup>122</sup> Van den Toorn, writing in 1955, took an opposite – though equally dismissive – view of the poem’s ethics which he called ‘rustic’, and contrasted them with the superior ‘heroic’ ethics characteristic of other eddic poems.<sup>123</sup> The heroic views, he argued, are the ‘more modern and do not reflect the small, narrow-minded, farmer-like situations that were characteristic in *Hávamál*’.<sup>124</sup> Hans Kuhn described *Hávamál* as *unberührt bodenständig*, seeing its morals as traditional and popular, while the values of the

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<sup>117</sup> For a survey of the contents and their classification see de Vries, ‘Om Eddaens Visdomsdigtning’, pp. 21–30. On the poem’s instructive element, see Wessén, ‘Ordspråk och lärodikt’.

<sup>118</sup> *Ethics and Morals*, p. 21.

<sup>119</sup> The history of scholarship on *Hávamál* is surveyed in Evans, *Hávamál*, pp. 4–38. The complexities have sometimes led scholars to study segments of the poem individually, as for instance in McKinnell, ‘*Hávamál B*’.

<sup>120</sup> Broader explorations of ideas of ethics and morality in Old Norse can be found in van den Toorn, *Ethics and Morals*; Bjarni Guðnason, ‘Þankar um siðfræði’; Gunnar Karlsson, ‘Dyggðir og lestir’ and ‘Ethics of the Icelandic Saga’.

<sup>121</sup> Chadwick and Chadwick, *Growth of Literature I*, 384.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.* On the critical attitude to human manners in *Hávamál*, see Dronke, *Poetic Edda III*, 51–3.

<sup>123</sup> Van den Toorn, *Ethics and Morals*, pp. 21–30.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

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heroic poems were to be seen as progressive and aristocratic.<sup>125</sup> This bipolar view of the ethics of the Edda breaks down very quickly, of course, as there is considerable overlap between the values espoused by the mythological wisdom poems and the heroic poems.<sup>126</sup> Van den Toorn himself was troubled by *Sigrdrífumál*, which he classified as somewhere in between rustic and heroic.<sup>127</sup>

More recent scholars have taken a kinder view of *Hávamál*'s ethics, by seeking to understand the poem on its own terms. John Lindow follows T. M. Andersson in concluding that 'the general tenor' of the gnomic section of the poem at least 'tends toward moderation'.<sup>128</sup> Andersson thus maintains the usefulness of the poem as a source for the ethical codes underlying much of Old Norse literature and therefore aims to rehabilitate it. In the end, he finds *Hávamál*'s outlook more akin to that of the sagas as it 'propounds the values of the middle way and social accommodation rather than "selfishness" or "a hectic pursuit of honour"'.<sup>129</sup> Rather than a dichotomy between a 'rustic' and 'heroic' ideal, he suggests instead a contrast between heroic and social values, placing *Hávamál* into the second category. Moderation is certainly a recurring theme in the poem, but it is less clearly and consistently advanced than Andersson suggests. More recently Karen Swenson has argued against the universal applicability of the ethics or precepts put forward in *Hávamál*, following a line of inquiry based on the idea that the poem itself alludes to the audience for which its precepts are intended. That audience, she contends, is a community of men united by the dangers they face from both the natural world and from women.<sup>130</sup> This reading depends upon her interpretation of the frame narrative which provides the identity of the speaker and his audience.

Analysis of the setting and speakers of *Hávamál* are, in other words, essential for a broader understanding of the associations of eddic wisdom poetry. In order to test any of these propositions for how the human audience of *Hávamál* is supposed to relate to its content, it is first necessary to address basic questions about the poem's unity. I will argue that the interpretation of *Hávamál*'s content, like that of the other

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<sup>125</sup> Kuhn, 'Die Rangordnung', p. 62. For similar views see Jón Helgason, *Norrøn Litteraturhistorie*, p. 30; and Finnur Jónsson, *Oldnorske I*, 230.

<sup>126</sup> For links between *Hávamál* and other poems see Larrington, 'Hávamál and Sources'; and Jackson, 'New Perspective', pp. 42–56. Of particular importance is the connection between *Hávamál* and *Hsv*: on this see below, Chapter V.

<sup>127</sup> Van den Toorn, *Ethics and Morals*, pp. 30–2.

<sup>128</sup> Lindow, 'Hávamál', p. 114.

<sup>129</sup> Andersson, 'Displacement of the Heroic Ideal', p. 592.

<sup>130</sup> Swenson, 'Women Outside'.

wisdom poems, depends on the identification of the speaking voice and narrative frame situation.

The starting point for addressing these questions must be the manuscript evidence. In arrangement, *Hávamál* seems to be divided into three sections, signalled by enlarged initial letters in the Codex Regius.<sup>131</sup> These divisions have been adopted and very often added to by modern scholars and editors in order to make sense of a poem that contains several jarring shifts in subject matter, form and tone. They surely derive from a complex transmission, which has been explored in some detail by Gustav Lindblad.<sup>132</sup> The poem is traditionally divided into six sections, originally proposed by Karl Müllenhoff.<sup>133</sup> The first, termed the gnomic poem, is by far the longest – running from the first stanza to the ninety-fifth, although the last fifteen stanzas of this group are somewhat dissociated from both the gnomic poem and the following section. A certain shift takes place from stanza 96, as the poem moves from gnomic generalizations to a comparatively extended narrative comprising stanzas 96–102. A very similar section follows in stanzas 104–10, describing another of Óðinn’s sexual adventures. The two episodes are separated by stanza 103, which consists of a general gnomic statement that cannot be readily assigned to either narrative. The next section, known as ‘Loddfáfnismál’,<sup>134</sup> begins possibly at 111 and certainly by 112. Here for the first time in the poem there is a named addressee, though the identity of Loddfáfnir is unclear.<sup>135</sup> Two final shorter sections follow. The first, ‘Rúnatal’, is very short (consisting of stanzas 138–45) and not particularly coherent: it is essentially defined as the material between two more obviously unified sections, forming a bridge between them.<sup>136</sup> ‘Ljóðatal’, the final section of the poem, consists of eighteen stanzas, with each containing a numbered spell.<sup>137</sup> The last stanza of the poem stands alone. These sections, though widely accepted, are not set

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<sup>131</sup> Codex Regius, 3r, 6r and 7v. These initials occur at the beginning of the gnomic poem (stanza 1), before ‘Loddfáfnismál’ (stanza 111) and at the start of ‘Rúnatal’ (stanza 138).

<sup>132</sup> Lindblad, *Studier*, pp. 324–7.

<sup>133</sup> Müllenhoff, *Deutsche Altertumskunde* V, 250–88.

<sup>134</sup> Postulated sections of *Hávam* will not be italicized as these titles are not attested in the Codex Regius.

<sup>135</sup> Loddfáfnir is not otherwise attested and, despite a few attempts to explain it, the meaning of his name is obscure; there may be a relation with words describing a trickster, jester or stooge. See Jackson, ‘New Perspective’, p. 56; Sturtevant, ‘Old Norse Proper Names’, pp. 488–9; Lindquist, *Die Urgestalt*, esp. p. 150; Dronke, *Poetic Edda* III, 59; and Evans, *Hávamál*, p. 125. For more general background, see Orchard, *Dictionary*, p. 234; and Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, p. 211.

<sup>136</sup> See specific discussion in Jackson, ‘Eddic Listing Techniques’.

<sup>137</sup> Larrington, *Store of Common Sense*, pp. 62–5, notes that these spells pick up on themes developed earlier in the poem.

in stone, and John McKinnell has recently suggested an alternative division of *Hávamál* into four core poems of different – and in at least some cases quite late – date, augmented with additional related material and spliced together with editorial material stressing the role of Óðinn.<sup>138</sup>

*Speaker and identity in Hávamál*

One way to test the extent to which these sections function as a unified whole is by considering the use of pronouns and references to the speaker and his audience across the poem. Close examination of the use of first- and second-person pronouns within the gnomic poem demonstrates a good deal of consistency within the frame narrative of at least the first eighty stanzas, if not *Hávamál* as a whole. There is good reason, in light of stanzas 13, 14 and perhaps 78 and 91, as we shall see, to view Óðinn as the speaker of the whole poem, though the identity of his addressee is ambiguous throughout. A dialogue format (though sometimes the second participant is only implied, in practice producing a monologue) is common to eddic poetry and is particularly apt for the ordering of gnomic material, which itself lacks the capacity for narrative progression.<sup>139</sup> Yet a great deal of flexibility still remains as material can be added, omitted, rearranged and conflated. Such reworking is likely to have occurred at any, and perhaps every, stage of the transmission of a poem like *Hávamál*. Thus it may be as pointless as it is hopeless to try to sort out every layer of reworking or even conceive of an uncontaminated original.<sup>140</sup> Yet despite some inconsistencies at the level of the narrative frame, *Hávamál* is a largely coherent poem, following a logical progression from general social observations and reflections to a more esoteric and hard-won knowledge. Though different sections of the poem may have originally belonged to different narrative contexts, they have been selected and ordered in such a way that they are, at least for the most part, not contradictory in order to create a new, coherent poem. This unity is achieved primarily through the Odinic context of the

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<sup>138</sup> McKinnell, 'Hávamál B', pp. 86–8 and (on the date of his *Hávamál* B) 92–9.

<sup>139</sup> Cf. Jackson, 'New Perspective' and 'Eddic Listing Techniques'.

<sup>140</sup> On the vexed question of *Hávamál*'s origins and unity, see especially Lindquist, *Die Urgestalt*, 'Ordstudier och tolkingar'; Wessén, 'Några stilfrågor'; Fidjestøl, 'Hávamål og den klassiske humanismen'; von See, 'Common Sense und Hávamål'; Evans, 'More Common Sense about Hávamål'; McKinnell, 'Hávamál B', pp. 83–8; and, for a summary of earlier discussion, Evans, *Hávamål*, pp. 4–8 and 35–8.

poem, which seems to have been emphasized or even added at the point of the poem's compilation in order to provide focus and coherence.<sup>141</sup>

The last five sections of the poem are unified to an extent against the first in their consistent use of a first-person narrator who is clearly Óðinn. The identity and role of the narrator in the gnomic poem (and indeed in the stanzas which link it to the narrative sections) are more complicated. The identity and role of the addressee are ambiguous throughout the poem, as he is only named in 'Loddfáfnismál' and it is far from clear that Loddfafnir is to be understood as the *þú* referred to elsewhere in the poem.<sup>142</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross argues that this is the case, seeing in *Hávamál* 'the development and further specification of the voices of narrator and narratee as the poem proceeds' with the narrator as Óðinn and the narratee as 'a basically human figure' later in the poem given the specific persona of Loddfáfnir.<sup>143</sup> If such a reading is tenable, it would provide some grounds for seeing a more sophisticated unity of the whole poem than is often allowed. Yet for all that both speaker and addressee are singular and masculine, it is also important to note that one is divine and the other appears to be human, and it cannot be taken for granted that Óðinn identifies with Loddfáfnir or that Loddfáfnir can be understood to stand for all mankind – or even just the masculine half. He is a specific character, but as he is otherwise unknown little can be said about him. Attempts have been made to decipher the etymology of his name, but (as noted above) these have produced varied and uncertain results. He is generally taken to be some sort of initiand or protégé, partly on the basis of his name, but mostly by analogy with figures like Agnarr in *Grímnismál*. The problem with this postulated relationship between Óðinn and Loddfáfnir is that it assumes that Óðinn is behaving benevolently towards him, that for whatever reason he wants Loddfáfnir to succeed and benefit from what he tells him. Yet even the refrain can be read as challenging: the advice will help him 'ef þú nemr ... ef þú getr' it.<sup>144</sup> An intriguing sequence of stanzas beginning with 132 warns him

at háði né hlátri    hafðu aldregi  
gest né ganganda!

<sup>141</sup> Cf. the conclusion reached in Larrington, *Store of Common Sense*, pp. 65–7.

<sup>142</sup> For older interpretations of this passage of the poem and of Loddfáfnir's role see de Vries, 'Om Eddaens Visdomsdigtning', pp. 24–5; Sturtevant, 'Relation of Loddfáfnir'; Bugge, *Studier I*, 322–79; and Müllenhoff, *Deutsche Altertumskunde V*, 252–70.

<sup>143</sup> Clunies Ross, 'Voice and Voices', p. 227.

<sup>144</sup> 'If you learn ... if you have'. *Hávam* v. 112 ll. 3–4 etc. (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 34; and transl. Larrington, p. 29).

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Opt vito ógorla, þeir er sitia inni fyrir,  
 hvers þeir ro kyns, er koma.<sup>145</sup>

While this is good advice generally, it applies particularly well to Óðinn’s victims in contests or trials of wisdom, like Vafþrúðnir or Geirroðr and begs the question of whether Loddfáfnir is aware of the identity of the speaker at this point. If this is the type of scene being invoked, then a human identity for Loddfáfnir is very plausible, but not strictly necessary.

The identity of Óðinn’s addressee before Loddfáfnir’s explicit introduction must be tested by an examination of the individual instances within the gnomic poem in which either a manifestly first-person voice occurs, or the presence of an addressee is made explicit by the use of a second-person pronoun. Each of these instances in the poem is listed in Table 1. ‘L’ is also given when Loddfáfnir is specified as the addressee. Attestations of the first person have been divided in the table into instances in which it is clear from accompanying mythological references that the first-person speaker must be Óðinn and those which provide no specific grounds for identification. This is not to argue that the first-person voice does not belong to Óðinn throughout, but rather to highlight the instances in which his identity as speaker is stressed and potentially more significant in both its immediate context and for the emergence of a distinctive narrative voice.

Table 1: Distribution of first- and second-person pronouns in *Hávamál*.

1st person		2nd person	1st person		2nd person
Uncertain	Óðinn		Uncertain	Óðinn	
	13		121	121 L	
	14		122	122 L	
39				123	
		44		124	
		45	125	125L	
		46	126	126L	
47			127	127L	
49			128	128L	
52			129	129L	
66			130	130L	
67			131	131L	
70			132	132L	
73			134	134L	
77			135	135L	

<sup>145</sup> ‘Never hold up to scorn or mockery a guest or a wanderer. Often those who sit in the hall do not really know whose kin those newcomers are’. *Hávam* v. 132 ll. 5–7 and v. 133 ll. 1–3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 38–9; and transl. Larrington, p. 33).

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1st person		2nd person
Uncertain	Óðinn	
78*		
		80
91		
	96	
	97	
	98	
	99	
	100	
	101	
	102	
	104	
	105	
	106	
	107	
	108	
	110	
111		
112		112 L
113		113 L
		114
115		115 L
116		116 L
117		117 L
118		
119		119 L
120		120 L

1st person		2nd person
Uncertain	Óðinn	
		136
137		137L
	138	
	139	
	140	
	141	
		142
		144
146		146
147		
148		
149		
150		
151		
152		
153		
154		
155		
156		
157		
158		
159		
160		
161		
162		162 L
163		

\* It is likely that the first-person voice in stanza 78 would be identified with Óðinn if the apparently mythological incident which it refers to were known from other sources.

*The first person*

It is immediately apparent from table 1 that the use of the first person within the gnomic poem is sporadic and confined to only a few groups of related stanzas. The first and second person never occur within the same stanza and the use of the second person triggers the start of a first-person picaresque account in stanza 47. Almost all of the stanzas in the Óðinn column belong to what some consider to be a separate section of the poem (as discussed above), comprising stanzas 96 to 102 and 104 to 110, in which Óðinn, prompted by the themes being explored by the maxims, breaks into a narrative describing his own sexual exploits. In the majority of cases in the gnomic poem, the use of the first person is not accompanied by specific mythological references and the identity of the speaker is not significant to the sense. The only

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major exception occurs in stanzas 13 and 14, which do make the narrator's identity as Óðinn explicit with references to specific mythological episodes.

Óminnis hegri heitir,      sá er yfir qlðrom þrumir:  
hann stelr geði guma;  
þess fugls fiqðrom      ec fiqtraðr varc  
í garði Gunnlaðar.

Qlr ec varð,      varð ofrqlvi  
at ins fróða Fialars;  
því er qlðr bazt,      at apr uf heimtir  
hverr sitt geð gumi.<sup>146</sup>

It may be that the poet is taking the opportunity to establish the narrator's identity at this point and afterwards explicit references are not necessary. Equally, the position of these stanzas could be coincidental and seek to draw on the audience's awareness of the narrator's identity rather than provide it.

The narration moves into the first person in line 5 of the second half of stanza 13 as Óðinn illustrates a maxim with a mythological episode in which he was involved. Yet the story alluded to, at least as it is related by Snorri, is not a particularly good example of the point being made in stanza 13. Carlyne Larrington suggests that the incongruity is deliberate and serves to demonstrate that advice may be valid for one situation, but not another. Thus in this instance, drunkenness can turn out well because the subject is a god rather than a human.<sup>147</sup> I would argue that it is Óðinn's individual identity rather than his divine nature as such that allows for the double standard. This is in keeping with the recurring idea that men (and gods) are unequal both in innate intellectual ability and learned wisdom, and this allows those superior in wisdom to flourish where others fail to their direct expense. The allusion and the maxim are thus primarily linked by the association of each with Óðinn himself and the stanza as a whole depends on his prominence as narrator for its sense. Stanza 14 continues the mythological allusion in the first half and then resumes the gnomic mode in the second half with a maxim that is perhaps more verbally than

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<sup>146</sup> 'The heron of forgetfulness hovers over the ale-drinking; he steals men's wits; with the feathers of this bird I was fettered in the court of Gunnlod. Drunk I was and more than drunk at wise Fialar's; that's the best sort of ale-drinking when afterwards every man gets his mind back again'. *Hávam* vv. 13–14 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 19; and transl. Larrington, p. 16). On the heron and its wider context of ritual drunkenness see Dronke, 'Óminnis hegri', esp. p. 54; on other interpretations see Johansson, 'Hávamál strof 13'.

<sup>147</sup> Larrington, *Store of Common Sense*, pp. 24–5.

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thematically apt, as the long line strongly echoes line three of stanza 13, and to a lesser extent the final line of stanza 12, *síns til geðs gumi*.<sup>148</sup> This is the only certain example of an unambiguous reference to Óðinn in the gnomic section of the poem.

The only other possible identification of the first-person speaker with a specific character who might well be Óðinn occurs in the first half of stanza 78, which also combines the first-person voice and a specific personal name and thus presumably a mythological reference.

Fullar grindr      sá ec fyr Fitiungs sonom:  
nú bera þeir vánar vql;  
svá er auðr      sem augabragð:  
hann er valtastr vina.<sup>149</sup>

Unlike before, this reference appears to have been included primarily to exemplify the following maxim, as while the narrator claims direct knowledge of events, he is not an active participant in them, as he was in the previous case. Thus stanza 78 makes very similar use of the first person to the other instances of which the identification of *ec* with Óðinn is possible but not necessary, or significant to the sense. A similar use of the first-person voice is made in stanza 70 which also uses the verb *sá*.<sup>150</sup> This construction serves to validate a general truth by placing it within the context of an individual's actual experience. The lack of any personal names or specific references in the stanza makes it clear that the identity of the individual is incidental and unessential to the point being made.

This pattern of maxims preceded or followed by confirmation from direct, but non-specific experience is the most common formula. Thus in stanza 52 a general truth is stated in the first half of the stanza and evidenced in the second.

Mikit eitt      scala manni gefa;  
opt kaupir sér í litlo lof:  
með hálfom hleif      oc með hóllo keru  
fecc ec mér féлага.<sup>151</sup>

The pattern is repeated in reverse in stanza 66.

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<sup>148</sup> 'About the nature of men'. *Hávnm* v. 12 l. 6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 19; and transl. Larrington, p. 16).

<sup>149</sup> 'Fully stocked folds I saw for Fitiung's sons, now they carry beggars' staffs; wealth is like the twinkling of an eye, it is the most unreliable of friends'. *Hávnm* v. 78 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 29; and transl. Larrington, p. 24).

<sup>150</sup> *Hávnm* v. 70 l. 4 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 28; and transl. Larrington, p. 23).

<sup>151</sup> 'Not very much need a man give, often you get praise for a little; with half a loaf and a tilted cup I've got myself a companion'. *Hávnm* v. 52 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 25; and transl. Larrington, p. 21).

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Mikilsti snemma kom ec í marga staði,  
enn til síð í suma:  
ql var druccit, sumt var ólagat,  
sialdan hittir leiðr í lið.<sup>152</sup>

Stanza 39 combines these stages, drawing a general truth from individual experience.

Fanca ec mildan mann eða svá matargoðan,  
at ei væri þiggia þegit,  
eða síns fiár svági ...,  
at leið sé laun, ef þægi.<sup>153</sup>

Neither the identity of *ec* nor *mildr maðr* is significant, but the wisdom espoused by the stanza is presented as the fruit of actual experience. This highlights the underlying idea – explicitly expressed in stanza 57 – that wisdom is to be gained not from a single absolute source, but from the shared experiences of individuals. Such a source is neither omniscient nor disinterested: a point which lies at the heart of the eddic presentation of wisdom and its value. It is in this spirit that Óðinn observes of himself, in light of his known capacity to break oaths, of himself in stanza 110 ‘hvat scal hans trygðom trúa?’<sup>154</sup> Audiences had to ask the same question and negotiate a delicate balance of discernment, authority and context.

Toward the end of the gnomic section, there is one stanza in which the use of the first person differs slightly from those discussed so far. Stanza 76 reads:

Deyr fé, deyia frændr,  
deyr síalfr it sama;  
enn orðztírr deyr aldregi,  
hveim er sér góðan getr.<sup>155</sup>

It is followed by another stanza with a very minimally different meaning, but this time using the first person in order to direct attention to the role of the narrator in relating this truth.

Deyr fé, deyia frændr,

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<sup>152</sup> ‘Much too early I’ve come to many places, but sometimes too late; the ale was all drunk, or sometimes wasn’t yet brewed, the unpopular man seldom chooses the right occasion’. *Hávnm* v. 66 (ed. *Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 27; and transl. Larrington, p. 23).

<sup>153</sup> ‘I never found a generous man, nor one so hospitable with food, that he wouldn’t accept a present; or one so well-provided with money that he wouldn’t take a gift if offered’. *Hávnm* v. 39 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 23; and transl. Larrington, p. 19).

<sup>154</sup> ‘How can his word be trusted?’. *Hávnm* v. 110 l. 3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 34; and transl. Larrington, p. 29).

<sup>155</sup> ‘Cattle die, kinsmen die, the self must also die, but glory never dies, for the man who is able to achieve it’. *Hávnm* v. 76 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 29; and transl. Larrington, p. 24).

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deyr síálfr it sama;  
ec veit einn, at aldri deyr:  
dómr um dauðan hvern.<sup>156</sup>

Unlike the other uses of the first person in the gnomic poem, this time *ec* is coupled with the verb *veit* rather than a verb denoting active experience, suggesting a different kind of knowledge. The construction is also used in stanza 138 which relates Óðinn's self-sacrifice as part of his effort to seek a more esoteric level of wisdom. It occurs once more before then, in the verses connecting the gnomic and narrative sections of the poem.

Bert ec nú mæli, þvíat ec bæði veit:  
brigðr er karla hugr konom;  
þá vér fegrst mælom, er vér flást hyggiom:  
þat tælir horsca hugi.<sup>157</sup>

It is not clear how *veit* is being used here. It could, particularly in the context of what follows, simply hint at his experiences with women. Yet knowledge of the *hugr* of men in their dealings with women could equally refer to something more esoteric. The former reading might be preferable, as the narrator's use of the first-person plural pronoun in the fourth and fifth lines of the stanza make it clear that he includes himself among *karla*. First-person utterances in *Hávamál* thus generally seem to presuppose Óðinn as speaker, but do not always make this explicit, let alone prominent. The fact that the speaker is an individual in possession of knowledge and experience often seems to be more prominent than that the individual in question is a god.

#### *The second person*

It remains to be considered to whom *ec* is talking. The strongest impression of an exchange between individuals occurs in a long passage of stanzas dealing with themes of friendship and generosity, which extends roughly from stanza 39 to stanza 52. This passage contains several stanzas in the first person, and is indeed bookended by

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<sup>156</sup> 'Cattle die, kinsmen die, the self must also die; I know one thing that never dies: the reputation of each dead man'. *Hávam* v. 77 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 29; and transl. Larrington, p. 24).

<sup>157</sup> 'I can speak frankly since I have known both: the hearts of men are fickle towards women; when we speak most fairly, then we think most falsely, that entraps the wise mind'. *Hávam* v. 91 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 31; and transl. Larrington, p. 26).

two of the aforementioned typical examples. Stanza 39 is followed by four stanzas of advice which are directed universally to a *maðr* and *vinir*.<sup>158</sup> Both general observations about the nature of the world and the social order and advice for functioning effectively within it appear to be acceptable within the genre and are mixed freely from the start of the poem. Stanzas 44–6, however, represent a genuine departure. For all that these stanzas too offer advice, they do so more pointedly, as they are addressed to *þú* rather than a hypothetical third person. Indeed, *þú* is very prominent in these stanzas: it is used five times in four lines in stanza 44, a further four times in stanza 45 and three times in 46. In this way they seem to anticipate ‘Loddfáfnismál’, in which constant reference is made to Loddfáfnir, who is also being offered advice. Yet it is not necessary to assume that it is Loddfáfnir who is being addressed here. It is perhaps natural that this isolated instance of direct address in the gnomic poem occurs within a section in which the narrator is unusually prominent and perhaps not coincidentally discussing personal interaction between men. An always implicit dialogue comes to the fore, but offers no insight into its participants and soon fades again into the background as the narrative again goes on to favour an impersonal mode of expression.

More perhaps can be read into the one remaining use of the second-person pronoun in the gnomic section.

Þat er þá reynt, er þú at rúnom spyrr,  
 inom reginkunnum,  
 þeim er gorðo ginregin  
 oc fáði fimbulpulr:  
 þá hefir hann bazt, ef hann þegir.<sup>159</sup>

This stanza could be part of a narrative frame in which the preceding material is meant to be read. It certainly marks a disruption in the metre. This would provide a very good context for the preceding monologue and its inclusion of occasional references to both the narrator and the addressee. The difficulty lies in the implication for what follows, as the poem continues, for a few stanzas at least, in much the same way. The subject of women, introduced in stanza 79 is picked up again in stanza 81 and appears to provide the impetus for the narrative passages. The confused position

<sup>158</sup> ‘Man’; and ‘friends’. *Hávnm* vv. 40–3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 23; and transl. Larrington, p. 19–20).

<sup>159</sup> ‘That is now proved, what you asked of the runes, of the potent famous ones which the great gods made and the mighty sage stained, then it is best for him if he stays silent’. *Hávnm* v. 80 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 29; and transl. Larrington, p. 25).

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of stanza 80 seems a likely casualty of conflation. It may have been introduced by a compiler seeking to make sense of the gnomic poem, but it may as easily be taken as vestigial evidence for an originally separate narrative frame for the gnomic poem, which was largely stripped away as part of the process of compilation. Such speculation is dangerous and in the absence of further evidence it is impossible to conclude either way. If it were not for the apparent finality of this statement, it could be read as part of the same frame narrative envisioned in stanza 111.

Mál er at þylia þular stóli á,  
Urðar brunni at;  
sá ec oc þagðac, sá ec oc hugðac,  
hlýdda ec á manna mál:  
of rúnar heyrða ec dæma, né um ráðom þogðo,  
Háva hóllo at, Háva hóllo í,  
heyrða ec segia svá.<sup>160</sup>

If this were the case, stanza 111 would mark an escalation in the dramatic relationship between the speaker and addressee, perhaps in anticipation of ‘Rúnatal’ and ‘Ljóðatal’, rather than a new beginning and the *þú* of the gnomic poem could be identified with Loddfáfnir. It is in these last sections that the greatest shift in the relationship between *ec* and *þú* occurs. The majority of stanzas 112 to 137 open with the refrain

Ráðomc þér Loddfáfnir, at þú ráð nemir,  
nióta mundo, ef þú nemr,  
þér muno góð, ef þú getr.<sup>161</sup>

Loddfáfnir almost certainly isn’t the *þú* originally referred to in the first two-thirds of the poem, but if *Hávamál* is viewed as a composite poem the various addressees may be equated as the compiler is content to let Loddfáfnir take over from the initial *þú*. As Swenson points out, both the speaker and audience then are presented as masculine.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> ‘It is time to declaim from the sage’s high-seat, at the spring of fate; I saw and was silent, I saw and considered, I heard the speech of men; I heard talk of runes nor were they silent about good council, at the High One’s hall, in the High One’s hall; thus I heard them speak’. *Hávam* v. 111 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 34; and transl. Larrington, p. 29). Ursula Dronke (*Poetic Edda* III, 58–9) sees this stanza as marking an important transition in Óðinn’s role within the poem.

<sup>161</sup> ‘I advise you, Loddfáfnir, to take this advice, it will be useful if you learn it, do you good, if you have it: don’t get up at night, except to look around or if you need to visit the privy outside’. *Hávam* v. 112 etc. ll. 1–4 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 34; and transl. Larrington, p. 29).

<sup>162</sup> Swenson, ‘Women Outside’, p. 227.

Yet for all that both speaker and addressee are singular and masculine, it cannot be taken for granted that Óðinn identifies with Loddfáfnir or that Loddfáfnir can be understood to stand for all mankind – or even just the masculine half. He is a specific character, but as he is otherwise unknown little can be said about him. Óðinn’s use of wisdom to control the rise and fall of human rulers in other wisdom poems provides the most plausible parallel for this encounter. Even if this is the case, the scene of instruction may not be entirely benevolent. Óðinn does on occasion aid men – as, for example, in his enumeration of battle omens to Sigurðr in *Reginismál*<sup>163</sup> – but his patronage is precarious, if we are to believe the prose introduction to *Grímnismál*, and he is by no means disinterested. Even though Agnarr profits from Óðinn’s wisdom in *Grímnismál* (having first demonstrated his own) it is directly at the expense of Geirroðr, who loses both life and kingdom. In *Hávamál* itself, although Loddfáfnir is receiving valuable counsel, there are hints that his instructor is not completely benevolent or at least not completely open with him and as I observed above, stanzas 132 and 133 may suggest that Loddfáfnir is unaware of Óðinn’s identity. Even the refrain can be read as challenging: the advice will help him ‘ef þú nemr ... ef þú getr’.

As *Hávamál* goes on it becomes increasingly confrontational as the subject matter becomes more esoteric. In ‘Rúnatal’ Óðinn tells of his own initiation into wisdom and runic knowledge before turning sharply back to his addressee and pelting him with a volley of questions in the most jarring metrical shift in the poem so far:

Veiztu, hvé rísta scal,    veiztu, hvé ráða scal?  
 veiztu, hvé fá scal,    veiztu, hvé freista scal?  
 veiztu, hvé biðia scal,    veiztu, hvé blóta scal?  
 veiztu, hvé senda scal,    veiztu, hvé sóa scal?<sup>164</sup>

This is followed by a list of spells that Óðinn boasts he knows, but does not share with Loddfáfnir (who is presumably being addressed throughout this section of the poem as his name recurs in stanza 162). These hints do not provide enough information to reconstruct the scene, but they do at least suggest that the relationship between the speakers is more complicated than simply that of teacher and pupil.

<sup>163</sup> Cf. for the heroic background in *Reg* Ussing, *Om det inbyrdes Forhold*, pp. 65–78.

<sup>164</sup> ‘Do you know how to carve? Do you know how to interpret? Do you know how to stain? Do you know how to test out? Do you know how to ask? Do you know how to sacrifice? Do you know how to dispatch? Do you know how to slaughter?’. *Hávam* v. 144 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 41; and transl. Larrington, p. 35). On the ‘dispatching’ of the dead in this stanza see Dronke, *Poetic Edda* III, 63.

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It is more significant, then, that both the speaker and addressee are singular. This goes some way towards explaining what has been read as selfish pragmatism in the poem. It is not intended to better society, except insofar as the interests of the individual and those of the group coincide. Swenson argues that the emphasis switches from individual to community within just the first two stanzas. *Hávamál* opens ominously with a warning for one entering a hall: that enemies may lie in wait in unknown positions. This is followed by a stanza, which Swenson reads as expressing danger inherent in the same situation for those inside the hall.

... gestr er inn kominn,  
hvar skal sitia síá?  
mioc er bráðr, sá er á brøndom scal  
síns um freista frama.<sup>165</sup>

The two sides (of men) are thus united by the common danger they face from each other. It is not at all clear, however, that the second stanza has any such meaning and indeed it is difficult to interpret in context. It could equally refer further to the danger faced by the guest in the hall once he has come in. These stanzas provide the only real hint of a narrative frame in the gnomic portion of the poem, but before the scene can be made explicit, the poem moves on, taking up the theme of a visit, and it is not at all clear whether what follows is to be read as the speech of the guest or part of the test. It could simply provide a hypothetical situation involving a guest, who is then the *þeim* referred to in the next three stanzas before more hypothetical men are introduced in what are essentially impersonal statements, but it might also serve as a frame for the whole poem. Either way, the emphasis remains firmly on the guest.

The repetitive chanting of stanza 144 directed at the addressee is almost goading, as is the shifting emphasis from the narratee to the narrator as *ráðomc þér*<sup>166</sup> is replaced by *kann ec*.<sup>167</sup> While in ‘Loddfáfnismál’ proper, Loddfáfnir was assured that the advice given to him would profit him and do him good,<sup>168</sup> the final stanza

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<sup>165</sup> ‘A guest has come in, where is he going to sit? He’s in great haste, the one who by the hearth is going to be tested out’. *Hávam* v. 2 ll. 2–6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 18; and transl. Larrington, p. 14).

<sup>166</sup> ‘I advise you’. *Hávam* vv. 112–13, 115–17, 119–22, 124–35 and 137 l. 1 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 34–9; and transl. Larrington, pp. 29–33).

<sup>167</sup> ‘I know’. *Hávam* vv. 147–63 l.1 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 42–4; and transl. Larrington, pp. 35–7).

<sup>168</sup> *Hávam* v. 112 ll. 1–4 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 34; and transl. Larrington, p. 29).

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warns (presumably referring to the immediately preceding material, but conceivably to the whole poem) that what has been said is both *allþorrf* and *óþorrf* for *sonom ýta*.<sup>169</sup>

#### *Odinic discourse and the unity of Hávamál*

It is above all the identity of a first-person voice that holds the originally distinct components of *Hávamál* together. By selecting the problematic figure of Óðinn as speaker for an exposition on communal ethics, *Hávamál* offers its audience commentary and strong caution on its own content. In order to understand what *Hávamál* is trying to accomplish, then, the question of whom Óðinn is addressing is key. The answer is an individual being, inferior in wisdom. We may not know exactly who he is, but what little we can glean about Loddfáfnir's identity invokes a familiar type of scene, as I will discuss in Chapter IV, as is sufficient for the poem's immediate purpose. He is a particular, singular addressee who can be mapped onto the *þú* of the gnomic poem. The majority of stanzas in *Hávamál* focus on interactions between men and some do seek to enhance social bonds.

Veiztu ef þú vin átt, þann er þú vel trúir,  
oc vill þú af hánom gott geta:  
geði scaltu við þann blanda oc giðfom scipta,  
fara at finna opt.<sup>170</sup>

Yet the next two stanzas offer a corollary, saying that if one has a friend that cannot be trusted,

fagrt scaltu við þann mæla, enn flátt hyggia  
oc gialda lausung við lygi,

and

hlæia scaltu við þeim oc um hug mæla.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> 'Very useful'; 'quite useless'; and 'sons of men'. *Hávnm* v. 164 ll. 3–4 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 44; and transl. Larrington, p. 38). This edition actually maintains an emendation of the second *ýta* ('of men') by a later hand to *iðtna* ('of giants'), producing a reading which suggests that the wisdom is useful for men, but useless for giants. On the reasons for maintaining the original manuscript reading, see Quinn, 'Liquid Knowledge', pp. 221–2.

<sup>170</sup> 'You know, if you've a friend whom you really trust and from whom you want nothing but good, you should mix your soul with his and exchange gifts, go and see him often'. *Hávnm* v. 44 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 24; and transl. Larrington, p. 20).

<sup>171</sup> 'Speak fairly to him but think falsely and repay treachery with lies'; and 'laugh with him and disguise your thoughts'. *Hávnm* v. 45 ll. 4–6 and v. 46 ll. 4–5 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 24; and transl. Larrington, p. 20).

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There are also a number of gnomes included that relate to the wellbeing of a given individual, who could be anyone, in ways that cannot directly affect society at large. Thus stanza 21 warns against eating too much and 23 against losing sleep worrying over problems that will remain in the morning.

If we return to Swenson's proposition that the poem draws upon their common gender in order to align Óðinn with all human men and thus render the sayings of the poem universally applicable (at least to men) the differences in the statuses and interests of Óðinn and his addressee must be overcome. Equally, the varying interests which often put men (indeed all individual human beings) at odds with each other that are explored in the poem must be shown to be of a fundamentally different character according to the gender of the parties involved. This is clearly not the case, however, as the poem treats the dangers posed by men and those posed by women in much the same way. Thus right after advising Loddfáfnir

illan mann láttu aldregi  
óhöpp at þér vita;  
þvíat af illom manni fær þú aldregi  
giold ins góða hugar,

the speaker is quick to add before the next refrain that a wicked woman can be equally dangerous:

Ofarla bíta ec sá einom hal  
orð illrar kono;  
flaráð tunga varð hánom at fiorlagi,  
oc þeygi um sanna soç.<sup>172</sup>

Just as with other men, relationships with women could be portrayed as either beneficial (as in stanza 130) or harmful (as in stanza 131), according to their status and motives.

Equally, both men and women are accused of fickleness towards each other and in this context Óðinn does count himself as part of a *vér* that includes men. Romantic entanglements are particularly difficult to negotiate and the admonition in that

eyvitar firna er maðr annan scal,

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<sup>172</sup> 'Never let a wicked man know of any misfortune you suffer; for from a wicked man you will never get a good thought in return'; and 'I saw a man fatally wounded through the words of a wicked woman; a malicious tongue brought about his death and yet there was no truth in the accusation'. *Hávnm* v. 117 ll.5-9 and 118 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 35-6; and transl. Larrington, p. 30).

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þess er um margan gengr guma;  
heimsca ór horscom gorir hǫlða sono  
sá inn mátki munr,<sup>173</sup>

is shown to be equally applicable to women in the two narrative tales that follow. The first tells of an instance in which a lovesick Óðinn is tricked by the object of his desire, but the ‘shared male outrage’ which Swenson argues it is designed to provoke is not in evidence.<sup>174</sup> On the contrary, the account is strikingly sympathetic towards *innar góðo kono*.<sup>175</sup> The account is also balanced out by the next narrative episode, in which Óðinn manipulates Gunnlǫð – also described in exactly the same words as a good woman – to win the mead of poetry.<sup>176</sup> The source of the danger to men is not so much women, but love, which is also dangerous for women. The language of the poem is predominantly masculine as indirect statements about a hypothetical *maðr* are preferred to direct commands. In most cases, however, the poem does not appear to refer to men as opposed to women, much less set out a completely separate community of men united by the dangers they face from women and the natural world. Stanzas 85–8 provide a long list of things not to be trusted, including dangers from men and women in the same breath as those posed by the natural world.

If he is not tied through Loddfáfnir to a community of men, it is difficult to determine how exactly Óðinn’s relationship to mankind is envisaged. For all that the first-person speaker claims experience of men on multiple occasions, he normally does so in order to defend his position as an authority over them and only in a few cases directly identifies himself with them. One such instance occurs within the passage treating the subject of friendship.

Ungr var ec forðom, fór ec einn saman  
þá varð ec villr vega;  
auðigr þóttomz, er ec annan fann,  
maðr er mannz gaman.<sup>177</sup>

<sup>173</sup> ‘Not at all should one man reproach another for what is common among men; among the sons of men the wise are made foolish by that mighty desire’. *Hávam* v. 94 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 31; and transl. Larrington, p. 27).

<sup>174</sup> Swenson, ‘Women Outside’, p. 227.

<sup>175</sup> ‘That good woman’. *Hávam* v. 101 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 32; and transl. Larrington, p. 27).

<sup>176</sup> *Hávam* v. 108 l. 5 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 33). Cf. McKinnell, ‘*Hávamál* B’, pp. 105–7.

<sup>177</sup> ‘I was young once, I travelled alone, then I found myself going astray; rich I thought myself when I met someone else, for man is the joy of man’. *Hávam* v. 47 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 24; and transl. Larrington, p. 20).

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In this case Óðinn is content to refer to himself as a *maðr*. It is very possible that the stanza is constructed around a pre-existing phrase ‘*maðr er mannz gaman*’, but even if this is so, it is enough that the poet was comfortable including it. A similar example occurs about twenty stanzas on:

Hér oc hvar myndi mér heim uf boðit,  
ef þyrptac at málungi mat,  
eða tvau lær hengi at ins tryggva vinar,  
þars ec hafða eitt etið.<sup>178</sup>

Taken literally, this could not apply to Óðinn, who miraculously lives on drink alone, and it is slightly odd that he should refer to himself as *leiðr* (as he apparently does in the final line of stanza 66), but, as in the case of stanza 47, stanzas 66 and 67 serve their purpose in context and such minor inconsistencies are therefore acceptable instances of poetic licence.

Another interesting case occurs in stanzas 54–6 which similarly take on additional meaning if the identity of the speaker is considered. Each opens with the refrain:

Meðalsnotr scyli manna hverr,  
æva til snotr sé;<sup>179</sup>

– an odd statement for a poem espousing wisdom. Andersson is not entirely comfortable with it,<sup>180</sup> but nevertheless takes it as evidence that the overriding theme of the poem is moderation. The reason for this strange pronouncement comes in the second halves of stanzas 55 and 56 which explain that

þvíat snotrs mannz hiarta verðr sialdan glatt,  
ef sá er alsnotr, er á.

and

ørloq sín viti engi fyrir,  
þeim er sorgalausastr sefi.<sup>181</sup>

These words apply to no one more strongly than they do to Óðinn himself, whose obsessive search for information about the inevitability of his own fate provides the

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<sup>178</sup> ‘Here and there I’d be invited to someone’s home when I had no need of food for the moment; or two hams would be hanging in a trusty friend’s house when I’d already eaten one’. *Hávam* v. 67 (e *Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 27; and transl. Larrington, p. 23).

<sup>179</sup> ‘Averagely wise a man ought to be, never too wise’. *Hávam* vv. 54–6 ll. 1–3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 25; and transl. Larrington, p. 21).

<sup>180</sup> Andersson, ‘Displacement of the Heroic Ideal’, p. 590.

<sup>181</sup> ‘A wise man’s heart is seldom cheerful, if he who owns it’s too wise’; and ‘no one may know his fate beforehand, if he wants a carefree spirit’. *Hávam* vv. 55–6 ll. 4–6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 25; and transl. Larrington, p. 21).

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narrative impetus for two of the eleven mythological poems in the Poetic Edda. Again, Óðinn offers advice that runs contrary to his own behaviour. Moreover, while his quest for wisdom may bring Óðinn some happiness, it is not unheroic and it does provide him with a source of great power which he utilizes repeatedly throughout the Poetic Edda.

#### CONCLUSION

Óðinn's divine status thus holds him at some remove from his addressee and his audience and in a few cases at least there is reason to doubt that his advice should be applied indiscriminately or taken at face value. The final stanza of *Hávamál* reads (without emendation):

Nú ero Háva mál qveðin, Háva hǫllo í,  
allþorǫf ýta sonom,  
óþorǫf ýta sonom;  
heill, sá er qvað, heill, sá er kann!  
nióti, sá er nam,  
heilir, þeirs hlýddo!<sup>182</sup>

It is not then a forgone conclusion that all men who hear the poem will be able to make use of its teachings and benefit from them. But it is true that the interplay between men and Óðinn, or more broadly authority and audience, lies at the heart of the poem, with important ramifications for wider views of links between mortals and the supernatural as conceived elsewhere in eddic poetry.

What mattered in *Hávamál* was, in a sense, giving a composite collection of wisdom new meaning by putting it into the words of Óðinn. Some (but far from all) of its content requires or presupposes this identification of the speaker, and when Óðinn's presence was not obvious, passages of more general authority centred on the broader principle of first-person instruction gained in their import. All wisdom, in a sense, became his purview. This conglomeration was only possible because of the fundamental similarity between Óðinn and the poem's human audience. As is shown

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<sup>182</sup> 'Now is the song of the High One recited, in the High One's hall, very useful to the sons of men, quite useless to the sons of men, luck to him who recited, luck to him who knows! May he benefit, he who learnt it, luck to those who listened'. *Hávam* v. 164 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 44; and transl. Larrington, p. 38).

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in *Hávamál* and other sources – eddic, skaldic and Christian – the gods shared a great deal with men, and *vice versa*: wisdom and advice manifestly pertaining to human society retained earthly significance even when divulged by a god. The wisdom Óðinn gained through learning and encyclopaedic experience thus continued to hold relevance for audiences as something to which they could aspire, however distantly: to attain his knowledge even Óðinn had been forced to go up to the point of death itself, which was a barrier both to men and gods. *Hávamál* therefore manifests the complex interrelationship Old Norse eddic poets imagined between men and gods: basic similarities allowed the gods to be cast as men writ large, embodiments of collective achievement or as mouthpieces to which we can relate in a forbidding supernatural world.

Indeed, the euhemeristic view of pre-Christian deities popular in medieval Scandinavia may have flourished in part because of the pre-existing conception of pre-Christian gods. This seems to have been in many ways vastly different from the conception of the deity introduced by Christian religion. Gender remained an important point for both gods themselves and in dealing with humans. Death, in particular, remained an inevitable and largely insurmountable threat for both men and other supernatural entities: all were mortals. In consideration of the eternal Christian divinity, man remained the measure of all things, but in this case only in order to pale in comparison with other beings. God and Christ could be likened to human rulers, but were otherwise distinct from the sphere of mortality, and by extension from the euhemerized supernatural beings of bygone beliefs. In short, where the Christian God was physically as well as spiritually separated from human beings on earth, mythological figures belonged to and helped define the plane of existence inhabited by living, corporeal beings.

This understanding of the pre-Christian divine led to a poetics that fully exploited the mythological realm and its inhabitants, whether the subjects of active religious belief or pseudo-history, or as a means of contextualizing and thereby controlling the interpretation of actual human lives and events. From the point of view of Old Norse poetics, all gods moved in mysterious ways, and all had wonders to perform: what mattered was whether these ways and wonders belonged to the death-bound world of men and mortal supernatural beings, or the eternal hereafter of Christian belief. For a thirteenth-century audience, poems about Óðinn's quest for wisdom continued to be culturally relevant as a means of exploring concerns about

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human mortality or the limitations of human knowledge. In this way eddic poetry continued to be meaningful to those who transmitted it in the late-medieval period.

## IV

# Speaker and Situation in the Mythological Frames of Wisdom Poetry

Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* begins with *Ynglinga saga*, in which he sets out the legendary predecessors of Norway's royal lineages. He reaches back into a time populated by mythic and divine figures, among whom – allegedly a great chieftain living on the river Don near the Black Sea – was *Ása-Óðinn*.<sup>1</sup> As in his Prose Edda, Snorri saw Óðinn as a man, albeit a very powerful one whose achievements and abilities were the stuff of legends. In particular, when he came to enumerate the achievements for which Óðinn was most famous, he began with the fact that 'Óðinn var gofgastr af öllum, ok af honum námu þeir allar íðróttirnar, því at hann kunni first allar ok þó flestar'.<sup>2</sup> He goes on to list a range of other magical skills and trappings, but for Snorri, Óðinn's wisdom was at the heart of his identity.

In this view Snorri concurs with other sources, and indeed his information was probably in large part based on surviving eddic poems. In these, Óðinn's wisdom is prominently showcased, as is his dangerously strong lust to increase his knowledge. He could at times be a giver instead of a taker. But dealing with Óðinn was central to his identification with wisdom: knowledge could only be got from interaction with others, and even Óðinn was not exempt from this rule. Gaining knowledge meant talking, and speech underpinned the imagined settings of eddic poetry. There is thus a strong Odinic thread running through a selection of the 'classic' wisdom poems in the Poetic Edda, which are examined in this chapter. *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál* and above all *Hávamál* reveal different aspects of how Óðinn sought, used and dispensed wisdom, and are complemented by a range of passages in other texts, including *Völuspá*, *Baldurs draumar*, *Reginismál* and *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*. Three general types of interaction can be distinguished among them. Two concern Óðinn's own search for wisdom, and it is possible to see marked differences in how he acquired information from the living and – with much more difficulty – from the dead. The

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<sup>1</sup> 'Óðinn of the Æsir'. Snorri Sturluson, *Heim (Yng)*, c. 6 (ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, p. 17; and transl. Hollander, p. 276).

<sup>2</sup> 'Óðinn was cleverest of all, and from him all the others learned their arts and skills. But he knew them first, and more than other folk'. Snorri Sturluson, *Heim (Yng)*, c. 6 (ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, p. 17; and transl. Orchard, *Dictionary*, p. 276).

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third type of interaction casts Óðinn instead as a source of wisdom for others, even if he is rarely a straightforward, open or reliable source. His information was always good, but understanding it – and sometimes the terms under which it was given – was not so easy.

Odinic wisdom as surveyed here can with good reason be classed as the ‘traditional’ wisdom of eddic verse. Óðinn’s presence was common wherever wisdom was found, and this association has been recognised since the time of Snorri and the compiler of the Codex Regius. But the manifestations of this association, and its implications for understanding the nature of wisdom revelation, merit further examination.

#### ÓÐINN AND THE ACQUISITION OF WISDOM

Óðinn is the motivating agent for the recitation of wisdom in all of the wisdom poems in which he appears.<sup>3</sup> A few revolve around his own search for information and thus feature wisdom from another source,<sup>4</sup> but more often Óðinn himself deploys his own wisdom in order make use of the powers it gives him, and thus it is his voice which is heard. In practice, both scenarios produce a quite similar result: an adversarial exchange in which Óðinn himself comes out ahead. Others may benefit, at least in the short term, although it is not always clear that they will. Óðinn is perhaps even less to be trusted in wisdom than in war, as his motivations and his methods appear to be more nuanced.<sup>5</sup>

Óðinn’s willingness to interfere in human affairs makes it natural perhaps that in poetry he appears more often as the source of wisdom than as its seeker, but that is not to say that there is little interest in the latter role. It forms the entire basis for the narrative frame of *Vafþrúðnismál*, which demonstrates that the characteristics behind Óðinn’s success in acquiring wisdom are exactly what make him problematic as a benefactor. At several points *Hávamál* also offers insights, in this case notionally Óðinn’s own, into the origins of his wisdom, which are explored in this chapter.

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<sup>3</sup> This in no way excludes the array of roles and appearances the figure of Óðinn takes on in various sources: for a survey see Lassen, ‘Textual Figures’.

<sup>4</sup> There is an obvious parallel here with the poems in which Óðinn interacts with a *vǫlva*, which are discussed below.

<sup>5</sup> On interaction between Óðinn and other mythological beings, see Schjødt, *Initiation between Two Worlds*, pp. 425–40; and for a general survey Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion*, pp. 35–74.

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*Vafþrúðnismál* is also unusual among the wisdom poems in providing a five-stanza poetic prologue that clearly lays out the scene. This extends even to the inclusion of a narrative stanza, confirming but not adding to the information laid out in the opening dialogue.<sup>6</sup> This dialogue serves to clarify the exchange that follows by identifying the wanderer as Óðinn and *Vafþrúðnir* as a powerful giant, renowned for his wisdom.<sup>7</sup> It also establishes his motivation for going to seek him out:

forvitni micla qveð ec mér á fornóm stöfum  
við þann inn alsvinna iqtun.<sup>8</sup>

As the poem progresses, however, it emerges that this is not strictly true, or at least is not the whole truth. Óðinn is after more specific information: confirmation of his own fate at *ragna rök*.<sup>9</sup> Defeating a powerful giant by his wits alone, more effectively than Þórr can seem to manage with his hammer, is an added bonus. The suspense that the prologue as a whole builds is also perhaps slightly disingenuous, and overstates the danger that the confrontation holds for Óðinn. Frigg's role is to express her concern, repeatedly, suggesting that the outcome of the wisdom contest is actually in doubt:

œði þér dugi, hvars þú scalt, Aldaföðr,  
orðom mæla iqtun.<sup>10</sup>

But it is *Vafþrúðnir* who is really in danger: if he accepts the challenge from his visitor he will die. The dramatic suspense of the poem revolves entirely around him, as he cements and then realizes his own doom. In contrast to the leisurely opening of the poem, it concludes abruptly and dramatically with *Vafþrúðnir*'s final answer.

Ey manni þat veit, hvat þú í árdaga  
sagðir í eyra syni;  
feigom munni mæltu ec mína forna stafi  
oc um ragna rök.  
Nú ec við Óðin deildac mína orðspeki,  
þú ert æ vísastr vera.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Vafþr* v. 5 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 45; and transl. Larrington, p. 40). For further discussion, see below.

<sup>7</sup> For the most recent survey of this debate and literature on it, see Hultgård, 'Wisdom Contest'. Also important are McKinnell, *Both One and Many*, pp. 87–95; Larrington 'Vafþrúðnismál and Grímnismál', pp. 64–5; and Ruggerini, 'Appendix'.

<sup>8</sup> 'I've a great curiosity to contend in ancient matters with that all-wise giant'. *Vafþr* v. 1 ll. 3–6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 45; and transl. Larrington, p. 40).

<sup>9</sup> See McKinnell, *Both One and Many*, pp. 99–106.

<sup>10</sup> 'May your wisdom be sufficient when, Father of Men, you speak with the giant'. *Vafþr* v. 4 ll. 3–6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 45; and transl. Larrington, p. 40).

Rather than a narrative epilogue, Vafþrúðnir is only given one extra half-stanza to conclude the poem. Here at last he understands the situation clearly and he acknowledges the truth that has been hinted at, but never stated: that it was information about *ragna rǫc* specifically which Óðinn was after and that in the actual wisdom contest Vafþrúðnir never stood a chance.<sup>12</sup> We are left to assume that Vafþrúðnir's death does in fact follow, but this is never confirmed and no details are given. The poem has followed Óðinn from the start and it continues to do so, losing interest in Vafþrúðnir as Óðinn himself does when he has gotten what he wanted from him. For all that the audience of the poem knows more than Vafþrúðnir does, enough to recognize his mistakes as he makes them, they are left to discover the full mythological significance of the episode alongside the giant.<sup>13</sup>

It also quickly becomes evident from his initial reaction at the beginning of the poem, when the disguised Óðinn enters his hall, that Vafþrúðnir is not in fact *alsvinnr*. Overconfident, he does think to ask the name of the stranger who has come into his hall and challenged him, but he doesn't wait for a reply before accepting and reiterating the deadly stakes. In his eagerness to begin, Vafþrúðnir ignores the hints of his identity which Óðinn seems to enjoy dropping. The first is his pseudonym, Gagnráðr, which is typically less than subtle.<sup>14</sup> Vafþrúðnir repeats it several times without understanding it. He receives another hint that all is not what it seems just before the contest begins, when Óðinn speaks the only gnomic-type stanza of the poem.

Óauðigr maðr, er til auðigs kǫmr,  
mæli þarft eða þegi;  
ofmælgj mikil hygg ec at illa geti,

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<sup>11</sup> 'No man knows what you said in bygone days into your son's ear; with doomed mouth I've spoken my ancient lore about the fate of the gods; I've been contending with Odin in wisdom; you'll always be the wisest of beings'. *Vafþr* v. 55 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 55; and transl. Larrington, p. 49).

<sup>12</sup> Hultgård, 'Wisdom Contest', p. 533.

<sup>13</sup> On the fatalistic aspect of the poem see McKinnell, *Both One and Many*, pp. 98–103; and Ruggerini, 'Appendix', pp. 174–9.

<sup>14</sup> Emending it to *Gangráðr* ('wanderer') as Finnur Jónsson (*Lexicon Poeticum*, p. 172) and Simek (*Dictionary*, p. 248) suggest seems unnecessary when the name makes sense as it stands. Tucker and La Farge (*Glossary to the Poetic Edda*, p. 77) translate it as 'possessor-of-victory' or 'he who gives good advice'. The difference depends principally on whether the adjective *ráðr* is translated as 'counselling' or 'deciding' (p. 211) and both senses are attested in different compounds. On the reading of this pseudonym, see Ejder, 'Eddadikten *Vafþrúðnismál*', pp. 11–13; and Quinn, 'Liquid Knowledge', p. 193.

hveim er við kaldrífiaðan kǫmr.<sup>15</sup>

Óðinn's false modesty in quoting the maxim plays on the giant's misreading of the situation and erroneous assumptions about his status relative to that of his guest, who knows full well that he is no less *auðigr* than Vafþrúðnir, materially or intellectually. He would do well here to remember the warnings in *Hávamál* against judging a wanderer at face value.<sup>16</sup> It is Vafþrúðnir, who is at a disadvantage and it is to him that the advice in the second half of the stanza applies. This strategy of deceiving with the truth is a favourite of Óðinn's and his mastery of poetic language makes him particularly adept at it. In a sense, the wisdom trial is completed before the formal contest begins. Vafþrúðnir has all the abstract information he needs about the nature of the cosmos, including divine and human behaviour, to be successful. It proves useless to him, however, when he is unable to use this information to interpret the situation he is faced with correctly.

Although the danger for Óðinn is past once the contest begins, the game is not yet won. Deceitful manipulation puts Óðinn in a position to question Vafþrúðnir, but more skill is required for extracting the actual information he is after. In the first instance, he must share wisdom himself in order to get the giant to reciprocate and submit to questioning. Vafþrúðnir asks a series of four questions, aimed at measuring the worth of his opponent. The first three ask him to identify various features of the mythological world that serve as boundary markers: the horses that draw the night and day; and the river that divides the domains of the giants and the gods. Óðinn answers each question in the first half-stanza of his reply and offers further commentary about it in the second. In his third reply, he hints at a knowledge that goes beyond the present, when he states that the river Ifing will flow unfrozen *um aldrdaga*.<sup>17</sup> Satisfied with his opponent's basic knowledge and perhaps intrigued by what he reveals in his final reply, Vafþrúðnir uses his final question to see whether Gagnráðr's knowledge really does extend to future events. As in his previous answers, Óðinn is able to furnish the name he is asked for and to offer an additional piece of information. At this point Vafþrúðnir is impressed and becomes genuinely curious,

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<sup>15</sup> 'The poor man who comes to the wealthy one should speak when needful or be silent; to be too talkative I think will bring bad results for the visitor to the cold-ribbed giant [literally just 'cold-ribbed one']'. *Vafþr* v. 10 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 46; and transl. Larrington, p. 41).

<sup>16</sup> *Hávam* vv. 132–5 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 38–9; and transl. Larrington, p. 33). These maxims, discussed above in Chapter III, are probably similarly self-referential.

<sup>17</sup> 'Through all time' (literally 'throughout the days of life'). *Vafþr* v. 16 l. 5 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 47; and transl. Larrington, p. 42).

though not yet suspicious, about his guest and ends the preliminary questioning by reiterating the terms of the contest.<sup>18</sup> This apparently allows Óðinn to take over the role of questioner and puts him in control of the direction of the conversation.

If Óðinn is exploiting some rule of procedure here, it is impossible to tell. The conventions of such contests are far from clear, but there are references enough to the importance of reciprocal exchange to suggest that *Vafþrúðnismál* is not unique in imagining a format that could potentially allow both sides a turn at questioning.<sup>19</sup> Language and speech are widely recognised as powerful tools of negative, neutral and generalized reciprocity:<sup>20</sup> in a society where compulsion was not easy and different parties did not always share the same goals, proper use of speech was essential to persuasion, advancement and indeed to survival.<sup>21</sup> In the words of the ethnographer Bronislaw Malinowski, ‘language is primarily an instrument of action and not a means of telling tales’.<sup>22</sup> Or, to put it another way, telling tales could be made into an instrument of action, and it is in this spirit that Óðinn begins by asking *Vafþrúðnir* for information about the ancient past. The implication is perhaps that the extent of his knowledge about the origin of things can be taken as a reflection of the extent of his knowledge about the future. Although Óðinn organizes his questions in a roughly chronological way, they always centre on the subjects themselves rather than their place in a narrative. Through the refrains he uses to frame his questions, however, we can trace the direction of Óðinn’s thought. In his initial series of questions about the past, which are numbered, Óðinn uses the refrain ‘segðu þat ... ef ... þú, *Vafþrúðnir*, vitir’.<sup>23</sup> The exact phrasing varies and progresses from the challenging ‘ef þitt æðir dugir’ to some variation of ‘allz þic svinnan qveða’ and finally in the tenth question

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<sup>18</sup> Ruggnerini (‘Appendix’, pp. 169–73) suggests that it is actually at this point that the contest proper begins. This is slightly problematic, as *Vafþrúðnir*’s acceptance of the wanderer’s challenge in stanza 7 indicates that neither party can withdraw from the contest. It certainly progresses to the next level, at any rate, and the compiler of the manuscript finds the moment pivotal enough to signal it by writing the heading *capitulum* at the start of this section.

<sup>19</sup> See for example *Hávam* v. 63 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 27).

<sup>20</sup> For this typology of reciprocity, see Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, esp. pp. 191–204. Another application of the principle to social interaction in Old Norse myth is Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes* I, 103–43.

<sup>21</sup> Schieffelin, *Give and Take*, esp. p. 137; Fabian, *Power and Performance*, p. 11; and in general Bourdieu, *Ce que parler veut dire*.

<sup>22</sup> Malinowski, *Coral Gardens* II, 52.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Tell me, if you, *Vafþrúðnir* know’. *Vafþr* v. 20 etc. ll. 1–3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 48–53; and transl. Larrington, p. 43).

‘allz þú tíva rǫc, ǫll, Vafþrúðnir, vitir’.<sup>24</sup> With the first two Óðinn mirrors Vafþrúðnir’s own strategy and indicates that he is testing his opponent’s worth as a source. This puts Vafþrúðnir in the position of answering the questions to defend his reputation as well as his life. With the third incarnation of the refrain Óðinn turns the questions, which up to this point have focused on the giants and the natural world, to the gods and more specifically to himself. He then rephrases the refrain as a question, by substituting *hví* for *allz* and betrays the intensity of his interest in this particular question with his appeal in second half of the stanza.

frá iǫtna rúnom oc allra goða  
segir þú ið sannasta,  
inn alsvinni iǫtunn.<sup>25</sup>

The metrical variation further underlines the shift in tone, which Vafþrúðnir acknowledges by echoing it in his answer.<sup>26</sup>

From this point Óðinn changes tack and rather than trying to conceal his purpose, goes about getting the information he wants and ending the contest as quickly as possible. His next series of questions is half as long and the first five are all about the end of the world. They are not numbered and he does not bother to vary the refrain, which is now centred on Óðinn himself rather than Vafþrúðnir and begins the process of revealing his identity. He does this explicitly with his final two questions: in the first he asks about his own fate at *ragna rǫc*;<sup>27</sup> and in the second he plays his trump card and wins the contest. *Vafþrúðnismál* demonstrates the danger and difficulty involved in attaining valuable wisdom and gives some insight into why Óðinn’s character makes him so uniquely good at it.<sup>28</sup> The undertaking in this case is an unqualified triumph, as Óðinn manages to get everything he wants while giving very little away. There is considerable risk involved, as there always must be in

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<sup>24</sup> ‘If your knowledge is sufficient’; ‘since you are said to be wise’; and ‘since all the fates of the gods you, Vafþrúðnir, know’. *Vafþr* v. 20 l. 2, v. 24 l.2 and v. 38 ll. 2–3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 48–52; and transl. Larrington, p. 43–6).

<sup>25</sup> ‘Of the secrets of the giants and of all the gods tell most truly, all-wise giant’. *Vafþr* v. 42 ll. 4–7 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 53; and transl. Larrington, p. 46).

<sup>26</sup> *Vafþr* v. 43 ll. 1–4 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 53; and transl. Larrington, p. 47).

<sup>27</sup> Larrington, ‘*Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*’, pp. 64–8.

<sup>28</sup> Schjødt, *Initiation between Two Worlds*, pp. 450–3 for supernatural knowledge and lust for its acquisition as Óðinn’s defining characteristics; wisdom more generally, however, is seen as key in (for example) Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, pp. 248–50.

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encountering any source powerful enough to have such wisdom and great skill is required both to gain access to it and to possess it.<sup>29</sup>

The normal process by which this is achieved is through verbal dialogue, in which each participant must find a way to draw the information they want from the other. The mead of poetry was the key to Óðinn's exceptional wisdom and his prowess in the arts of speech.<sup>30</sup> According to Snorri at least,<sup>31</sup> it was created from the blood of Kvasir, the incarnation of perfect wisdom. Kvasir was formed out of a mingling of the spittle of the Æsir and the Vanir to mark the peace between them. He was then killed by dwarfs, who claimed he died of natural causes by choking on his own wisdom, since no one was wise enough to ask him questions. It was the dwarfs who actually made the mead, transforming it into a much more accessible state. One need only possess the physical commodity in order to take advantage of its power. In the myth of Óðinn's acquisition of the mead, he does not need his skill as questioner, but his power to deceive with words still plays a crucial role, as also does his willingness risk his life in pursuit of wisdom.

*Hávamál* refers to the story twice, in very different contexts. The second instance is a brief narrative interlude, citing the example of his manipulation of Gunnlōð as an illustration of the fickleness of men towards women. While it certainly does serve this purpose in context, it does more than that. It is not mere caprice that motivates Óðinn in this tale; he stresses the real danger he faced: 'svá hætta ec höfði til'.<sup>32</sup> He is also at pains to point out that he couldn't have achieved what he did without taking advantage of Gunnlōð and even suggests perhaps that the resulting benefit to so many justifies hurting her, as

þvíat Óðrerir er nú upp kominn  
á alda vés iaðar.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> For interpretations of Óðinn's skill as based on magic, see Renauld-Krantz, 'Odin'; and, for a more cautious view in the context of 'Ljóðatal', Larrington, *Store of Common Sense*, pp. 63–5.

<sup>30</sup> See Quinn, 'Liquid Knowledge', pp. 193–201.

<sup>31</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. G57 (ed. Faulkes, pp. 3–4; and transl. Faulkes, pp. 61–2). He quotes the skaldic kenning *kvasis dreyra* from *Vel* (ed. Faulkes I, 12, l.2). This appears to support him, but Frank ('Snorri', pp. 159–60) argues that Snorri misread Kvasir as a personal name rather than a common noun meaning something like 'fermenting mash' and consequently invented this part of the myth.

<sup>32</sup> 'Thus I risked my head'. *Hávam* v. 106 l. 6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 33; and transl. Larrington p. 28).

<sup>33</sup> 'For Óðrerir has now come up to the rim of the sanctuaries of men'. *Hávam* v. 107 ll. 4–6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 33; and transl. Larrington p. 28). Tucker and LaFarge (*Glossary to the Poetic Edda*, p. 135) gloss *alda* as 'of the gods'. Both are plausible (see Chapter III above) and a more inclusive reading is perhaps called for as both groups do directly benefit.

Óðinn also refers in passing, at the end of stanza 106, to the way he was able to get past Suttungr in order to gain access to Gunnlōð and the mead. Though very allusive as they stand, these few lines do give credence to Snorri's claim that he turned himself into a snake in order to fit through a hole he had tricked a giant into creating for him.<sup>34</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross takes this ability to change shape as a quality closely related to Óðinn's deceptive intelligence and perfidiousness, as it can literally make him more difficult to read.<sup>35</sup> At the end of the episode he reflects on what it reveals not about his gender,<sup>36</sup> but about his own particular character.

Baugeið Óðinn hygg ec at unnit hafi,  
hvat scals hans trygðom trúa?<sup>37</sup>

The other occurrence of the story employs it similarly as a narrative illustration of gnomic wisdom, this time ostensibly the dangers of drunkenness. These are personified by the *Óminnis hegri* who steals *geð* from men.<sup>38</sup> Óðinn claims this creature took possession of him in the court of Gunnlōð. He then gives another example from his own experience in the first half of the next stanza, in which he claims he was 'ofrōlvi at ins fróða Fialars'.<sup>39</sup> Fialarr is sometimes identified as Suttungr, and thus the anecdote is taken as a continuation of the one begun in the previous stanza, but it is more likely that it refers to a separate event.<sup>40</sup> In the case of the first allusion, we know from other sources, not least a later portion of the poem, that Óðinn's dealings with Gunnlōð led to an invaluable acquisition for gods and men. The effect of including it must be to undermine the maxim or at the very least hint that Óðinn himself has found a way to profit from excess, of knowledge in this case. This is more clearly the message of the second stanza which ends

því er qlðr bazt, at aprt uf heimtir  
hverr sitt geð gumi.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>34</sup> *Hávnm* v. 106 ll. 4–5 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 33); and Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. G58 (ed. Faulkes I, 4; and transl. Faulkes, p. 62).

<sup>35</sup> *Prolonged Echoes* I, 71.

<sup>36</sup> He could alternatively be relating the reaction of frost-giants of the previous verse to learning what he had done.

<sup>37</sup> 'I thought Óðinn had sworn a sacred ring-oath, how can his word be trusted!'. *Hávnm* v. 109 ll. 1–3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 34; and transl. Larrington p. 29).

<sup>38</sup> 'Heron of forgetfulness'; and 'sense'. *Hávnm* v. 13 ll. 1 and 3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 19).

<sup>39</sup> 'Too drunk at wise Fialar's'. *Hávnm* v. 14 ll. 2–3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 19). On Óðinn's entry into the poem in these stanzas see Dronke, *Poetic Edda* III, 39.

<sup>40</sup> Quinn, 'Liquid Knowledge', pp. 196–7.

<sup>41</sup> 'That's the best sort of ale-drinking, when afterwards every man gets his mind back again'. *Hávnm* v. 14 ll. 4–6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 19; and transl. Larrington, p. 16).



ACQUIRING WISDOM FROM THE DEAD

The greatest limitation Óðinn has to overcome in his quest for wisdom is the fundamental divide between the living and the dead, which (as Chapter III explores) binds supernatural beings just as it does mankind. The wisdom of the dead is particularly valuable, both because of the content and nature of the information they possess and the extreme difficulty involved for living beings in accessing it.<sup>49</sup> Direct personal experience is by far the most important source of wisdom as eddic poetry presents it (as further explored in Chapters II and VI), and death therefore entails tremendous cultural as well as individual loss. For the most part, this sort of primary information is naturally limited to the lifespan of the individual and those with whom he or she is in direct contact. The words of distant individuals and past generations preserved in sayings and poetry (and more rarely in written form)<sup>50</sup> represent a limited, non-renewable source of additional information. Accessing the dead directly is normally impossible, requires extraordinary measures and abilities and entails tremendous risk. Óðinn's ability and willingness repeatedly to seek out the wisdom of the dead are fundamental to his characterization as the archetypal wise man.<sup>51</sup> The myths in which he pushes the boundaries of the knowable, above all those which involve extracting information from the dead, ultimately serve to reinforce those boundaries.

The most direct method for contacting the hereafter is the most dangerous: Óðinn attempts to come near enough to death himself to reach the other world without losing the ability to return to this one. Two such scenes occur in the wisdom poems with very little commentary or elaboration and they are quite difficult to interpret. The first is the aforementioned hanging myth from 'Rúnatal'. This episode has plausibly been interpreted as part of a ritual initiation into wisdom.<sup>52</sup> It is difficult, however, to construct a coherent narrative to explain what exactly this entailed. The second stanza in this section adds some details, revealing that during the time Óðinn

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<sup>49</sup> On the place of the dead in general see *ibid.* I, 247–57. See also Abram, 'Hel in Early Norse Poetry'; and Quinn, 'Gendering of Death'.

<sup>50</sup> For instance *Hávam* v. 144 and *Sigrdr* vv. 14–19. For general background to the latter poem see von See *et al.*, *Kommentar* V, 497–530.

<sup>51</sup> See particularly Schjødt, *Initiation between Two Worlds*, pp. 451–3, 'Óðinn – shaman eller fyrstegud?'; also Auld, 'Psychological and Mythic Unity'.

<sup>52</sup> Fleck, 'Self-Sacrifice'; Sundquist, 'Om hängingen'; von Hamel, 'Óðinn Hanging'; and Dronke, *Poetic Edda* III, 40–1.

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was hanging, he was deprived of food and drink.<sup>53</sup> He looked *niðr*, took up the runes and then fell back *þaðan*.<sup>54</sup> According to *Grímnismál*, Yggdrasil has three roots and under these live Hel, the frost giants and human men respectively.<sup>55</sup> The next few stanzas of ‘Rúnatal’ describe what he achieved through this: Bölþorr, his maternal uncle, taught him nine spells and he gets a drink of the mead of poetry, presumably from the same source.<sup>56</sup> It is only the number nine that explicitly links these stanzas back to the event described in the previous two, but it is enough to suggest a cause and effect relationship and also that it was the giants that Óðinn sought wisdom from. Lindow argues that to travel so, disembodied, to Giantland Óðinn may have entered into a shamanistic trance or even actually died.<sup>57</sup> He takes the statement at the very end of the section, that *þundr* (another of Óðinn’s names)<sup>58</sup> ‘upp ... reis er hann apr of kom’<sup>59</sup> to refer to his return from the giants. The wisdom he gained from this venture cost him much more than that which he learnt from Vafþrúðnir. This owes perhaps to the more esoteric nature of runic knowledge: *Hávamál* seems to be structured around a gradual movement from more common to more exclusive wisdom.<sup>60</sup> ‘Rúnatal’ also marks a shift in tone as Óðinn becomes less forthcoming and more challenging,<sup>61</sup> culminating in ‘Ljóðatal’, a list of valuable spells he knows but will not share. He guards this numinous knowledge selfishly, not only because of the extraordinary power it gives him directly, but also because it sets him up as a unique source of otherwise inaccessible information. He now represents a living source from which this knowledge may be sought without repeating a potentially fatal ritual. Given his treatment of human and mythological interlocutors, as discussed below, extracting information from Óðinn could prove to be just as dangerous.

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<sup>53</sup> This is reminiscent of the scene in *Grí* and the possible relationship between them is discussed at a later point in this chapter.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Downwards’; and ‘from there’. *Háv* v. 139 ll. 3 and 6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 34; and transl. Larrington, p. 40). Ursula Dronke has suggested (*Poetic Edda* III, 62) that this may refer to a ritual somersault.

<sup>55</sup> *Grí* v. 31 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 63; and transl. Larrington, p. 56). Cf. Dronke, *Poetic Edda* III, 131.

<sup>56</sup> For discussion of the significance of the giants’ role here as Óðinn’s maternal kin, see Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes* I, 224–8.

<sup>57</sup> Lindow, ‘Handbook’, pp. 82 and 248–50.

<sup>58</sup> For interpretation see Grundy, *Cult of Óðinn*, p. 83.

<sup>59</sup> ‘Rose up, when he came back’. *Háv* v. 145 ll. 8–9 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 41; and transl. Larrington, p. 35).

<sup>60</sup> After the beginning of ‘Loddfáfnismál’ at 6r, the beginning of ‘Rúnatal’ at 7v is the only other major shift in the Codex Regius scribe signals graphically with an enlarged initial.

<sup>61</sup> See in particular stanza 144 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 41; and transl. Larrington, p. 35).

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The second potential instance of the deliberate orchestration of a near-death experience in order to extract wisdom occurs in *Grímnismál*. Óðinn is tortured to the point of death, restrained between fires and deprived of food and drink.<sup>62</sup> He responds by speaking a long monologue, listing mythological wisdom. It is unclear whether or not Geirroðr's treatment of his guest was a deliberate effort to prompt such a revelation, and the answer to this question as well as the reading of the poem as a whole hinges on how the prose frame relates to the poem proper.<sup>63</sup> I will return to this point in Chapter VI. But however it is interpreted, it is clear from the poem that Óðinn's imprisonment is involuntary in contrast to his hanging and self-mutilation.<sup>64</sup> Getting wisdom from the dying, it suggests, is possible, but it puts the seeker in a precarious position as it is precisely in this state that an enemy may prove to be most powerful. Sigurðr takes advantage of the opportunity to question the dying dragon in the opening section of *Fáfnismál*, but he exercises caution, initially attempting to conceal his name.<sup>65</sup> Fortunately for Sigurðr, his interests align with his victim's. Fáfnir hence chooses to aid him as a means of getting revenge against his treacherous brother Reginn, who has wronged them both. Yet the young hero persists in treating Fáfnir as an adversary and views his advice with suspicion: 'Heiptyrði', Fáfnir observes, 'telr þú þér í hvívetna'.<sup>66</sup> Sigurðr continues to counter good sense with heroic sentiment and perhaps he is admirable for doing so. If his aim is to act as an ideal hero, he succeeds, though if he cared for self-preservation he would have done much better to heed the dragon's warning.<sup>67</sup> The actual action of the dragon fight is not given poetic treatment and the danger and power of the dragon are instead expressed through the power of his dying words.<sup>68</sup> If Sigurðr does recognize the truth of his warnings, as his fatalistic replies suggest he does, then the episode serves to elevate his tragic heroism. He chooses his fate, fully conscious of the consequences.

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<sup>62</sup> *Grí* vv. 1–3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 57–8; and transl. Larrington, p. 52). On the revelation of Óðinn's identity in these stanzas, see Dronke, *Poetic Edda* III, 127.

<sup>63</sup> Schjødt, 'Fire-Ordeal in the *Grímnismál*'.

<sup>64</sup> For a reading of this which casts Óðinn as initiand into wisdom, see Schröder, '*Grímnismál*', pp. 371–7 (though Geirroðr too has been seen as the initiand: Klingenberg, 'Types', pp. 155–6).

<sup>65</sup> *Fáfn* vv. 1–3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 180–1; and transl. Larrington, p. 157–8).

<sup>66</sup> 'Spiteful words you think you hear in everything'. *Fáfn* v. 9 ll. 1–2 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 182; and transl. Larrington, p. 159). Cf. von See *et al.*, *Kommentar* V, 421.

<sup>67</sup> Indeed, it may be that the aim of the instruction he receives is to introduce him (and the audience) to the virtues necessary for a king: Kragerud, 'De mytologiske spørsmål i Fáfnismál', p. 21.

<sup>68</sup> This has not hindered other interpretations which view the dragon fight in a different light, for instance as a parallel for Christ's struggle against Satan: Blindheim, 'Fra hedensk sagnfigur', pp. 22–6.

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There is a possibility of benefiting from encounters with the dying, therefore, but at the cost of control as their liminal position paradoxically makes them most powerful when at their physically weakest.<sup>69</sup> Óðinn alone manages to profit from dying in life by surviving, though never unscathed. Others may benefit from encounters with the dying if they are shrewd enough and comprehend the extent of their disadvantage. If the dying figure wishes them harm, however, then (like Geirroðr) they might pay for the wisdom with their life.

Rather than flirting with death so directly himself, in *Völuspá* and *Baldrs draumar*, Óðinn questions figures already dead. One of the spells he boasts of knowing in *Hávamál* pertains to this ability. It echoes the scene of his own hanging in stanza 138, lending weight to the implication made by the poem's arrangement that he learned the spells as well as the runes through his brush with death hanging on the tree.<sup>70</sup>

þat kann ec iþ tólpta, ef ec sé á tré uppi  
váfa virgilná:  
svá ec ríst oc í rúnom fác,  
at sá gengr gumi  
oc mælr við mic.<sup>71</sup>

While *Hávamál* claims Óðinn uses magic to consult the dead, *Völuspá* and *Baldrs draumar* report the words that two dead beings speak to him. Both are described as temporarily revived *völur*.<sup>72</sup> *Völuspá* is cast entirely as a monologue in her voice and the narrative frame is only established by her own references to it. She establishes her credentials to speak truly about both the distant past and future in a similar way to the giant Vafþrúðnir: like him she was born of *iǫtna* and can tell of the beginning of the world because she was there to witness it.<sup>73</sup> In *Vafþrúðnismál* Óðinn asks the giant repeatedly to tell him what he knows, but midway through the contest he asks more

<sup>69</sup> Schjødt, *Initiation between Two Worlds*, pp. 387–90. For an extension of this more nuanced attitude towards the afterlife, see Nedkvitne, *Møte med døden*, p. 33.

<sup>70</sup> On this passage see Kure, 'Hanging on the World Tree'; Fleck, 'Óðinn's Self-Sacrifice'; and now Sundquist, 'Hanging', and 'Om hängningen' who interprets the nine nights as the length of time needed to reach the realms of the dead.

<sup>71</sup> 'I know a twelfth one if I see, up in a tree, a dangling corpse in a noose: I can carve and colour the rune that the man walks and talks with me'. *Hávam* v. 157 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 43; and transl. Larrington, p. 37).

<sup>72</sup> *Vsp* v. 66 l. 8; and *Bdr* v. 4 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 15 and 277).

<sup>73</sup> Ursula Dronke (*Poetic Edda* II, 31) taking *borna* to refer to the giants rather than the first person speaker, argues that stanza 2 of *Vsp* indicates only that the speaker was fostered by giants and that there is no suggestion that she herself is inhuman.

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specifically that he relate ‘hvatt þú first mant eða fremst um veizt’,<sup>74</sup> drawing a distinction between second hand knowledge and direct personal experience. He answers that he knows the giant Bergelmir was born long before the creation of the world, and that he has already given information about that giant’s ancestry, but he first remembers him being dead.<sup>75</sup> The *vǫlva* reports first hand experience from the start, beginning her account with what she *man*.<sup>76</sup>

Both the *vǫlva* and *Vafþrúðnir* can speak with authority about the past because of the antiquity of their race, but their knowledge of the future comes from different sources. Beyond personal experience, *Vafþrúðnir* claims his extensive knowledge derives from his wide travels, which he stresses include even the realm of the dead.

Frá iǫtna rúnom    oc allra goða  
ec kann segia satt,  
þvíat hvern hefi ec heim um komit  
nío kom ec heima    fyr Niflhel neðan,  
hinig deya ór helio halir.<sup>77</sup>

Like Óðinn, then, *Vafþrúðnir* has been in the rare position to gain first-hand knowledge from the realm of the dead where the fates of the living are known.<sup>78</sup> He can confirm what Óðinn learned about his own fate from the *vǫlva* in *Vǫluspá*. As Judy Quinn has pointed out, however, she expresses this knowledge differently, in terms of the cognitive process of seeing as opposed to knowing. By virtue of her prophetic powers, she is able to describe the future passively as she experiences it.<sup>79</sup> Her information about the future is first-hand.

When the source of information is dead, there is no question of its accuracy. Difficulties lie rather with accessibility. The *vǫlva* Óðinn questions in *Baldrs draumar* is undoubtedly a giantess (v. 13) and openly hostile to him, both from the outset for summoning her (v. 5), apparently an unpleasant process, and at the end of

<sup>74</sup> ‘What you remember or what you know to be earliest’. *Vafþr* v. 34 ll. 4–5 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 51; and transl. Larrington, p. 45).

<sup>75</sup> Snorri (*Gylf*, ch. 7 (ed. Faulkes, p. 11; and transl. Faulkes, p. 11)) citing only v. 35 of *Vafþr* as a source claims that Bergelmir was the sole giant survivor of Ymir’s killing and the subsequent creation of the world (in a borrowing from the Christian flood story, as Larrington has observed: *Poetic Edda*, p. 269) and, as the poem corroborates in vv. 28–9, the last common ancestor of all the giants.

<sup>76</sup> ‘Remembers’. *Vsp* v. 1 l. 8 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 1; and trans. Larrington, p. 4).

<sup>77</sup> ‘Of the secrets of the giants and of all the gods, I can tell truly, for I have been into every world; nine worlds I have travelled through to Mist-hell, there men die down out of hell’. *Vafþr* v. 43 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 53; and transl. Larrington, p. 47).

<sup>78</sup> Preparations for the arrival of a particular guest are a common motif, across Old Norse poetry: see for example *Bdr* vv. 6–7 or the eddic memorial poem *Eiríksmál*.

<sup>79</sup> Quinn, ‘Dialogue with a *vǫlva*’, pp. 251–2.

the exchange.<sup>80</sup> Óðinn conceals his identity initially, presumably because he would have met with even more resistance in learning what he needs to know, but once he has what he came for he reveals himself through a telling question in a move that seems purely vindictive.<sup>81</sup> She may have been compelled to speak, unlike his living prey, but he wants her to suffer from knowing she has given information up to the enemy. While she is enraged, however, she remains defiant. Óðinn has once again gained the only kind of wisdom he is powerless to act on: fated death.

The structure of *Baldrs draumar* is an abbreviated version of a wisdom dialogue like *Vafþrúðnismál* or *Alvíssmál* for all that there is no actual contest here. The narrative prologue is followed by a question and answer exchange, beginning with the identity of the visitor. The questioning proper is punctuated by refrains until it breaks down into open confrontation after Óðinn has revealed himself. This similarity to a wisdom contest is superficial, however, and the poem actually functions in quite a different way. The narrative context, for instance, is much more prominent. It is set up with four stanzas of third person narration, quite a leisurely beginning to a fourteen stanza poem, contrasting with the one stanza of narration and four stanzas of dialogue of the fifty-five stanza poem *Vafþrúðnismál*. The relationship between the frame narrative and the content of the revelation, moreover, is far more direct. As in *Völuspá*, Óðinn is seeking information on behalf of all the gods and their allies who will be affected by it. The first stanza makes it clear this journey is the will of *æsir allir* and *ásynior*, and mankind's interest in the matter is suggested by the reference to Óðinn in the next stanza as *alda gauþr*.<sup>82</sup> Baldr's death is the only subject he is interested in and while he dissembles about his identity, he never attempts to disguise this point. The dialogue continues not because he seeks information on a variety of subjects, but because he has to continue the narrative: 'vil ec enn vita'.<sup>83</sup> The refrain 'vitoð ér enn, eða hvat?' in *Völuspá* is never answered, but

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<sup>80</sup> Cf. von See *et al.*, *Kommentar* III, 377–96, 423–4 and 461–6.

<sup>81</sup> Why exactly is a matter of speculation. Larrington (*Poetic Edda*, p. 295) suggests it may simply be that in mythological poetry 'only Odin goes about asking such questions' and this may well be explanation enough. The question is reminiscent of the wave riddles in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* and so it is also possible that the question could be linked to Óðinn in a more specific way.

<sup>82</sup> 'The sacrifice for men'. *Bdr* v. 2 l. 2 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 277; and transl. Larrington, p. 243). See also the extensive comments in von See *et al.*, *Kommentar* III, 405–9 (who stresses the dual meaning of *alda gauþr*, which can also be interpreted as 'old sacrifice').

<sup>83</sup> 'I want to know more'. *Bdr* vv. 8, 10 and 12 l. 4 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 278–9; and transl. Larrington, pp. 244–5).

it implies a similar badgering for the narrative to continue.<sup>84</sup> In this way the refrains function not so much as a structuring device used to order the dialogue and mark shifts in its direction, as they do in *Vafþrúðnismál*, but instead to express the desperation for information which has led Óðinn to seek it directly from such a hostile source.<sup>85</sup>

There is no hint of reciprocity either. Information flows one way only, compelled from a *vǫlva* in this instance and bought in *Vǫluspá*,<sup>86</sup> and the beneficiary is explicitly described as a much larger audience than Óðinn himself. There is no comparison of wisdom between individual characters as in *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Fáfnismál* or even the monologue *Grímnismál*. The full dialogue of the revelation is given in *Baldrs draumar* because it is part of the main story being narrated, unlike the circumstances of the *vǫlva*'s speech in *Vǫluspá*. This is not the story of Baldr's death and avenging; it is the story of how it became known, a crucial part of the rest of the unfolding myth. It is completely fitting then, that the poem's metre should reflect a narrative genre rather than a wisdom contest despite the similarities between them.

That is not to say these similarities are unintentional. On the contrary, Óðinn's attempts to draw the conversation into another mode are a way of trying (unsuccessfully) to achieve an equal footing with the *vǫlva*, to recreate a kind of familiar situation in which he has the power to influence the outcome. The *vǫlva* disabuses him of this illusion immediately though, either because she cannot answer the question or because she has no interest in engaging him in this way.<sup>87</sup> She can hardly be killed, and responds with derision rather than terror:

Heim ríð þú, Óðinn, oc ver hróðigr!  
Sva komit manna meirr apr á vit,  
er lauss Loki líðr ór þöndom  
oc ragna rǫc riúfendr koma.<sup>88</sup>

He has no further power over her and she reminds him that he is equally powerless in preventing not only Baldr's death but his own. Óðinn can defeat powerful giants in

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<sup>84</sup> 'Do you understand yet, or what more?'. *Vsp* v. 27 etc. l. 8 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 7; and transl. Larrington, p. 7).

<sup>85</sup> Quinn, 'Dialogue with a *vǫlva*', p. 258.

<sup>86</sup> *Vsp* v. 29 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 7; and transl. Larrington, p. 8).

<sup>87</sup> Quinn ('Dialogue with a *vǫlva*', p. 258) observes that a riddle 'is beyond her epistemological and discursive ken'.

<sup>88</sup> 'Ride home, Odin, and be proud of yourself! No more men will come to visit me, until Loki is loose, escaped from his bonds, and the Doom of the Gods, tearing all asunder, approaches'. *Bdr* v. 14 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 279; and transl. Larrington, p. 245).

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wisdom contests, but he cannot control this type of exchange in the same way and it serves as a reminder that death and the giants will triumph over him yet.

#### ÓÐINN DISPENSING WISDOM

This extensive poetic treatment of Óðinn's acquisition of knowledge establishes his value and nature as a source of wisdom for others. It is in this role – as dispenser of wisdom – that he appears most often in eddic poetry. In *Völuspá* and *Baldurs draumar* he merely facilitates a revelation, but does not himself shape or interpret it. In the wisdom poems, however, Óðinn parcels out information carefully, using it as a currency of power. Thus in *Vafþrúðnismál*, he gives out just enough wisdom of his own to maintain the giant's interest in the contest and prompt him to reciprocate. He gets what he is after and kills a powerful giant as an added bonus. The giant receives a fitting reward for his arrogance.<sup>89</sup> His aims in *Hávamál* are more difficult to determine because of the nature of the poem as a composite, as I have discussed above, but there is good reason to postulate an agonistic relationship between him and his addressee in the ghosts of the narrative frame. His addressee could be human or supernatural and for the purposes of the poem it does not particularly matter which.

Indeed, Óðinn uses his wisdom to manipulate the lives of men on numerous occasions in eddic poetry.<sup>90</sup> He teaches them lessons like the giant Vafþrúðnir's and by controlling the flow of knowledge ensures that they are dependent on him for success or failure. He intervenes in events directly as well, as for instance when he lends Dagr his spear to break his oath and kill Helgi in *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana ǫnnor*. Wisdom revelation can be just as destructive, but it can equally be beneficial and is portrayed as essential for the successful ascension to kingship and continued exercise of its power for many of the greatest men of heroic legend.<sup>91</sup> Within the narrative frames, the ability to extract information from Óðinn successfully serves as a test of worth for his interlocutors, who must read the situation and identify the god correctly in order to survive the exchange and convert Óðinn's wisdom into temporal

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<sup>89</sup> McKinnell, *Both One and Many*, pp. 98–103; and Ruggerini, 'Appendix', pp. 174–9.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, pp. 248–50.

<sup>91</sup> Several examples are explored in Fleck, 'Konr—Óttar—Geirroðr', 'Knowledge Criterion'; Schjødt, "Fire-Ordeal" and *Initiation between Two Worlds*, p. 218. A different reading, stressing a more shamanistic context, is found in Bucholz, 'Shamanism'.

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power.<sup>92</sup> For the audience of the poem, these narrative frames create a context for understanding the actual content of the wisdom and serve as a reflection on the difficulties as well as the value of pursuing wisdom. Óðinn's recurring role as the source of wisdom is crucial, and (I would argue) integral to the presentation of learning in eddic verse.

The poems treating the youth of the most famous of heroes, Sigurðr Fafnisbani, dwell primarily on his initiation into all types of wisdom by a variety of different beings.<sup>93</sup> Along with the dying dragon, Sigurðr learns various types of wisdom from Óðinn and a valkyrie, a being hitherto directly subject to the god.<sup>94</sup> Reginn instructs him as a child, but when the time comes for Sigurðr to avenge his father and assume his place as an adult, his assistance is no longer sufficient. This becomes evident in *Reginismál*, when they set off on an expedition to avenge Sigurðr's father. A storm threatens their ship on the way to the battle and an old man observes them from a cliff and asks who they are. Reginn answers and asks for his identity in return. The man replies:

Hnicar héto mic, þá er Hugin gladdi  
Völsungr ungi oc vegit hafði.  
Nú máttu kalla karl af bergi,  
Feng eða Fiölni; far vil ec þiggja.<sup>95</sup>

It is the first of these pseudonyms that Sigurðr elects to use to address the old man once he has come aboard.<sup>96</sup> Hnikarr and Fiölnir are both given as names for Óðinn in stanza 47 of *Grímnismál*.<sup>97</sup> Some combination of these names, the man's appearance,

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<sup>92</sup> For secular political context see Bagge, *Society and Politics*, p. 149; and Schjødt, *Initiation between Two Worlds*, p. 374. One might compare the widespread supposition that 'Hrothgar's sermon' in *Beowulf* (1700–84) (ed. Fulk, Bjork and Niles, pp. 57–60) presents both an example of and exhortation towards royal wisdom: see discussion and references cited in Orchard, *Critical Companion*, pp. 155–62; and Fulk, Bjork and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, pp. 213–16.

<sup>93</sup> See in general Schjødt, *Initiation between Two Worlds*, pp. 282–99; Orchard, *Dictionary*, pp. 314–20; Haimperl, 'Sigurd'; Holtsmark, 'Sigurdsdiktningen'; and de Vries, *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte* I, 88–90.

<sup>94</sup> The dragon's role is discussed in King, 'Siegfried's Fight'; and Neckel, 'Siegfrieds Drachenkampf'. For Odinic interaction see Jackson, 'Óðinn's Meetings'; and Schjødt, *Initiation between Two Worlds*, pp. 287–97. On valkyries and other eddic female figures see Quinn, 'Women', pp. 523–8; and also Clover, 'Maiden Warriors'; and Ström, *Diser, normor, valkyrjor*.

<sup>95</sup> 'Hnikarr they called me when young Völsungr gladdened the raven when there was fighting; now you may call the old man on the cliff Fengr or Fiölnir; I would like passage!'. *Reg v. 18* (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 178; and transl. Larrington, p. 155). For discussion see von See *et al.*, *Kommentar V*, 326–8.

<sup>96</sup> The Codex Regius does not actually indicate who speaks verse 19 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 178), but Sigurðr is most logical in context and the text of *Nornagests þátr* declares that he spoke the verse (von See *et al.*, *Kommentar V*, 329–31).

<sup>97</sup> Cf. Orchard, *Dictionary*, pp. 200–1.

his odd desire to be taken as passenger on a sinking ship and the subsequent quieting of the storm is apparently enough for Sigurðr to make the correct identification that so many other characters bizarrely fail to. When Sigurðr addresses Hnikarr, he speaks in *ljóðahátttr* and asks for knowledge of ‘goða heill oc guma’, those which are most useful in a battle.<sup>98</sup> With this phrasing he implies that he has recognised the man’s supernatural nature and he does not waste the opportunity to gain the wisdom needed for his immediate undertaking. He specifically asks for information that will be useful to a man going into battle and presumably finds it valuable in fighting Hundingr’s sons. The actual battle is quickly glossed over by the prose and skipped over entirely by the verse. The latter concludes with a single stanza after the last omen, quoting Reginn’s exclamation of Sigurðr’s victory. In this way, the poem keeps its focus on the development of Sigurðr’s character and emphasizes the wisdom he successfully gains from Óðinn as the instrument of his victory and the key to claiming his inheritance.

The episode does not make it into the late summary poem *Grípispá*, which also fails to mention his dialogue with the dying Fáfnir.<sup>99</sup> The role of the supernatural is played down generally, though it cannot be completely avoided, and the focus is placed on the events that positioned Sigurðr for his downfall, which is portrayed as tragic but unavoidable. Perhaps these conversations are not included because they undermine Sigurðr’s innocence by suggesting that the prince should have had the wisdom necessary to overcome deception.

Although *Grípispá* makes no reference to the role that Sigurðr’s encounter with Óðinn plays in his rise to power, the prose versions of the cycle do choose to include it. Their accounts are based on *Reginismál*, but they show more interest in the fact of Óðinn’s interference than what the scene can reveal about the hero. *Völsunga saga*, which credits Óðinn with playing a more active part in the hero’s affairs generally, tells the first part of the story, in which he saves Sigurðr’s fleet from the storm. It does not, however, mention the list of battle omens or his conversation with Sigurðr, who is not said to be directly involved in the exchange at all.<sup>100</sup> Thus the story functions as a confirmation of Óðinn’s patronage of Sigurðr rather than another

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<sup>98</sup> ‘Omens of gods and men’. *Reg* v. 19 l. 3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 178; and transl. Larrington, p. 155). On the wisdom connotations of the verb introducing this passage (*segðu*), see von See *et al.*, *Kommentar* V, 331.

<sup>99</sup> *Gríp* vv. 9–13 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 165–6).

<sup>100</sup> *Völsunga saga*, ch. 17 (*Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson I, 147–50).

test of the hero's wisdom.<sup>101</sup> The episode gets a similar treatment in *Norna-Gests þáttur*, which in contrast to the saga, relates a much lengthier version of the story and retains all of the poetry. Yet here too it is Óðinn who is the active party and Sigurðr's question is turned into an answer to Hnikarr's offer of advice. He disappears when they reach land and the narrator comments that it was at this point that they realized they had been talking to Óðinn. No mention is made of either his disappearance or the discovery of his identity in *Reginsmál*. Like Sigurðr, the audience is expected to piece together the allusions and realize what has occurred. In this way it conforms much more closely with the other scenes of Odinic instruction in eddic poetry.

The scene of Sigurðr's instruction by the valkyrie Sigrdrífa also depends on the audience's knowledge of commonly recurring eddic motifs.<sup>102</sup> The text of *Sigrdrífumál* forms a much more coherent unity than either of the other editorially defined poems that proceed it. The body of the poem is structured around two lists, one of runes linked together by verbal repetition and one of pieces of advice numbered in a refrain. Sigurðr's voice is heard only in the brief dialogues that introduce the two and link them together and the conclusion of the poem is lost to the lacuna in the manuscript. What we learn from these dialogues is just enough to extrapolate the narrative context necessary to understand the exchange: Óðinn had trapped a woman, wearing a corslet, in sleep and the victorious warrior Sigurðr has freed her. Her words make it clear that their lots are now bound together in her mind and she gives him runic wisdom and a magic drink. The significance of these clues is not lost on the modern reader and could hardly have been lost on a medieval audience either. Additional prose information is nonetheless included to spell out the implicit narrative, perhaps for aesthetic more than explanatory purposes: *Sigrdrífumál* is a wisdom poem, but in the context of the Codex Regius compilation it is an important link in an epic narrative.<sup>103</sup>

Its role in the greater story draws more attention to the identity of this particular valkyrie. Her name only occurs in the prose,<sup>104</sup> perhaps in order to make an

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<sup>101</sup> Orchard, *Dictionary*, pp. 200–1 and 315; Jackson, 'Óðinn's Meetings'; and Schjødt, *Initiation between Two Worlds*, p. 445.

<sup>102</sup> J. Quinn (*pers. comm.*) has discussed the conventions of the valkyrie's role in a recent paper entitled 'Advice of a Valkyrie'. There may also be an Old Testament element to the background of the wisdom in *Sigrdr: von See et al., Kommentar V*, 506.

<sup>103</sup> Larrington, *Store of Common Sense*, pp. 86–93; and von See *et al., Kommentar V*, 498–519.

<sup>104</sup> *Völsunga saga*, ch. 20–1 (*Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson I, 156–63) simplifies the narrative somewhat by identifying her as Brynhildr.

explicit link between this poem and the separate poetic sequence of the nuthatches' speech. The prose fleshes out her backstory, even quoting a couple of lines from another poem, in a way that is very interesting in terms of the greater Codex Regius narrative but not strictly relevant to the immediate wisdom poem. The poem is once again more interested in the actual wisdom content and also what the exchange reveals about Sigurðr, who once again recognizes an important opportunity to gain wisdom. In style, tone and content, the valkyrie's wisdom is strikingly similar to Óðinn's in *Hávamál* and perhaps it would not be going too far to speculate that he is her source.<sup>105</sup> By getting the wisdom from her rather than his fickle patron, Sigurðr can be sure he is getting *ástráð*.<sup>106</sup> He understands, however, that even if the source is more benevolent it does not follow that he will be able to profit from it; this wisdom brings him more painful awareness than power.<sup>107</sup> The valkyrie tries to act in Óðinn's role as patron as well as lover to the hero. It is not at all clear, however, whether she succeeds in passing effective wisdom onto him any more than any valkyrie ultimately does in usurping his will to change the fates of men. By casting a valkyrie in Óðinn's role, the poem suggests that while this paradigm for learning appears more promising, it does not guarantee the ability to make successful use of the wisdom any more than does a hostile exchange.

The narrative context of *Grímnismál* – the most extensive Odinic display outside of *Hávamál* – is more complex.<sup>108</sup> Like *Sigrdrífumál*, the actual verse contains a very minimal explanation of the scene.<sup>109</sup> When the prose is considered, however, the poem offers two somewhat different takes on an instance of Odinic instruction. The first comes in a narrative tale which precedes the poem, related in the first substantial prose passage of the Codex Regius manuscript. According to the story, Óðinn and Frigg each foster one of the two sons of Hrauðngr. Óðinn takes the younger brother, Geirroðr, and Frigg takes Agnarr. When the time comes to succeed

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<sup>105</sup> J. Quinn (*pers. comm.*) argues that her presumption in teaching arcane knowledge is an extension of her usurpation of Óðinn's role in choosing the slain in battle and points out that Hroptr (Óðinn) is credited with the divine provenance of the runes. For the valkyrie as an indirect link to Óðinn himself see Schjødt, *Initiation between Two Worlds*, pp. 431–3. Sigrdrífa's wider significance is discussed in Reichert, 'Zum Sigrdrífa-Brünhild Problem' and 'Die Brynhild-Lieder'.

<sup>106</sup> 'Loving advice'. *Sigrdr v.* 21 l. 4 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 194; and transl. Larrington, p. 170). For discussion see von See *et al.*, *Kommentar V*, 593–5.

<sup>107</sup> *Sigrdr v.* 21 ll. 1–3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 194). Cf. *Háv m vv.* 54–6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 25).

<sup>108</sup> For detailed discussion of its composition see Jackson, 'Art of the List-Maker'. The general significance of prose introductions in eddic manuscripts is considered in Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*, pp. 194–203.

<sup>109</sup> On the interaction of prose and verse in *Grí*, see Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North*, p. 224.

their father, they all set out on a ship; but when it reaches the harbour, Geirroðr – acting on Óðinn’s advice – jumps onto the land and pushes the ship with the others on it back out and curses Agnarr. By betraying his brother in this way, he is then able to secure the kingship for himself.

At some later date, Frigg becomes annoyed with Óðinn when he boasts of the relative success of his foster son. She manipulates him into going in disguise to test Geirroðr by falsely accusing him of stinginess. She then sends word to Geirroðr that he should be wary of a *fiqlkunnigr maðr*<sup>110</sup> – not an unfair description of Óðinn – that no dog would attack. When he discovers this man, he captures and questions him, but Óðinn refuses to identify himself beyond the name Grímnir and so Geirroðr tortures him for information. At this point his son is introduced into the story. He is called Agnarr after his uncle and happens to be ten years old at this point – the same age the elder Agnarr was when Frigg found him. He recognizes the man’s innocence and offers him proper hospitality in the form of a drink.

This elaborate story creates a narrative frame for the poetry that follows, which is made up entirely of Óðinn’s speech. The first three stanzas of *Grímnismál* give enough information for what follows to make basic sense and to hint to an astute audience the direction the scene will take.<sup>111</sup> A first-person speaker is introduced in stanza 1, as is his first addressee: the *hripuðr*.<sup>112</sup> He goes on to reveal in the second stanza that he has been *milli elda hér* for eight nights that no one brought him food ‘nema einn Agnarr, er einn scal ráða, Geirroðar sonr, Gotna landi’.<sup>113</sup> Thus the tone turns prophetic, and in the next stanza Agnarr is addressed directly and the first-person speaker provides his first real clue as to his identity.

Heill scaltu, Agnarr, allz þic heilan biðr,  
Veratýr vera;  
eins drycciar þú scalt aldregi  
betri giold geta!<sup>114</sup>

It is striking that the speaker uses Veratýr rather than Óðinn, as he turns in later stanzas to discussing Óðinn’s practice of drawing on the many names available to him

<sup>110</sup> ‘A man skilled in magic’. *Grí* prose prologue (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 56 ll. 23–4).

<sup>111</sup> Larrington, ‘*Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*’, pp. 68–9; and Jackson, ‘Art of the List-Maker’.

<sup>112</sup> ‘Fire’. *Grí* v. 1 l. 1 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 57; and transl. Larrington, p. 52).

<sup>113</sup> ‘Here between the fires’; and ‘except Agnarr alone, and he alone shall rule, the son of Geirroðr, over the land of the Goths’. *Grí* v. 2 ll. 2 and 4–6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 57; and transl. Larrington, p. 52).

<sup>114</sup> ‘Blessed shall you be, Agnarr, since Óðinn bids you blest; for one drink you shall never get a better reward’. *Grí* v. 3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 58; and transl. Larrington, p. 52).

in order to disguise himself.<sup>115</sup> The first half of the stanza is deliberately ambiguous and it can be read to mean either that the speaker, Veratýr, is blessing Agnarr for his actions or that he prophesies that Óðinn will do so, as Agnarr has upheld the laws of hospitality. The prose introduction has already revealed the identity of the narrator explicitly and thus undermined the gradual revelation of his identity in the poem. These first few stanzas certainly give Geirroðr, and the audience, enough information to identify him as Óðinn and to anticipate the fatal outcome of the revelation that follows. Yet the speaker intentionally refrains from confirming the identification until the end of the poem. The direction of stanza 3 to Agnarr adds to this indirect taunting of Geirroðr: what is promised to him must come at Geirroðr's expense. Without the prose frame, the audience has all the information necessary to understand the scene and can, moreover, share in what must be Geirroðr's growing dread as the reality of his fatal error becomes increasingly apparent.<sup>116</sup>

Why this preface is necessary is not immediately clear, especially when *Hávamál* (which occurs immediately before it in the manuscript) is allowed to pass without comment or clarification. Rather than simply illuminating the narrative context of the revelation, the preface complicates it and, to an extent, reshapes its interpretation. It introduces a precursor to Geirroðr's son Agnarr, in the form of a brother who is not mentioned in the poem. In this context the son Agnarr becomes the instrument of Frigg's revenge on Óðinn: his ascendancy provides some compensation for the fall of her favourite and is achieved through Óðinn's suffering. It is the divine characters that drive the action of the story and the human characters are more or less at the mercy of their machinations. Geirroðr is not guilty of the crime of which he has been accused and his downfall is engineered principally in order to punish his patron.

The prose also includes other additional details which develop the narrative, but are not necessary for understanding what follows in the verse. It unfolds at a relatively leisurely pace, and breaks into direct speech at dramatic moments. This style contrasts greatly with, and perhaps undermines, that of the poem itself, which builds suspense and terror through minimal, allusive references to the narrative

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<sup>115</sup> *Grí* vv. 46–54 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 66–8). For a list of Odinic pseudonyms and titles see Orchard, *Dictionary*, pp. 410–12.

<sup>116</sup> Schröder, '*Grímnismál*', pp. 375–8; and Klingenberg, 'Types', pp. 154–60.

frame.<sup>117</sup> The poem is tightly structured, considering its length and monologue form. References to the narrative context are subtle and increase the tension without distracting from the poem's primary purpose: to reveal valuable mythological wisdom. While relating a numbered list of residences, for example, Grímnir breaks the sequence only once to elaborate, with two stanzas on Valhöll that open with the refrain that it 'mið er auðkent, þeim er til Óðins koma'.<sup>118</sup> Yet when Óðinn himself is before him in his hall, Geirroðr cannot recognize him. The poem seems to delight in leaving the audience in the dark in the same way as the human characters, so that they must work out what is going on, and must wait like Geirroðr until the end of the poem to have their suspicions confirmed. The prose introduction changes the way the audience engages with the poem by providing them with extra information not available to the human characters in the poem.

The motivations the prose attributes to the characters are also lacking, or at least not made explicit in the verse.<sup>119</sup> It reveals only that Geirroðr has failed to identify his patron – possibly because he is drunk – and thereby forfeited his support, which Óðinn then bestows on his son Agnarr, who shows more promise of wisdom. There is no mention at all of Frigg, her protégé Agnarr or the age of Geirroðr's son. Óðinn's anger is directed exclusively at Geirroðr and his failure in the present. Rather than conflict among the gods, the verse centres around the divine judgement of human characters, which is achieved through the wisdom revelation and the paradox that although two characters are given the same chance to hear it only one will benefit from it. It is Agnarr's act of giving him food at the beginning of the poem that secures Óðinn's favour, and the death of Geirroðr is at once a punishment for the father and reward for the son. This shows not only that Agnarr has a proper sense of hospitality – which may be the inspiration for Frigg's deceit in the prose preface – but also suggests the possibility that he has recognized their guest. This would accord well with Óðinn's pointed invective at Geirroðr:

Qlr ertu, Geirroðr,      hefr þú ofdrucit;  
mið ertu hnugginn,      er þú ert míno gengi,  
ollom einheriom,      oc Óðins hylli.

<sup>117</sup> Ralph, 'Composition', esp. pp. 97–8; and Klingenberg, 'Types', pp. 154–5.

<sup>118</sup> 'Is very easy to recognize for those who come to Óðinn'. *Grí* vv. 9 and 10 ll. 1–2 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 59; and transl. Larrington, p. 53).

<sup>119</sup> For different arguments on the priority of the prose and verse passages, see Ralph, 'Composition', p. 98; and Larrington, '*Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*', pp. 68–74.

Fiolð ec þér sagða, enn þú fát um mant,  
of þic véla vinir.<sup>120</sup>

The same intellectual blindness – perhaps a metaphorical drunkenness – that prevented Geirroðr from recognising him also prevents him from retaining the wisdom just revealed.<sup>121</sup> Óðinn makes it clear that Geirroðr’s failure in the wisdom contest means death by his own sword. How exactly this is carried out is not explained. The prose again offers a specific explanation of how this occurs and confirmation that Agnarr did indeed rule for a long time afterwards: the revenge is complete. The verse, however, ends – like *Vafþrúðnismál* – with Geirroðr alive and now fully aware that he has doomed himself. For the purposes of the wisdom poem, the narrative is complete at this point and the details of how Geirroðr actually died are uninteresting. The verse offers only a brief image of his death.

Mæki liggia ec sé míns vinar  
allan í dreyra drifinn.<sup>122</sup>

A prose epilogue to the poem explains, in a rather complicated way, how he came to fall on his sword and so concludes the greater narrative of Frigg’s revenge as introduced in the prose preface.<sup>123</sup> Agnarr and the audience of the poem are thus given both wisdom and a warning: that the process of gaining the wisdom necessary to acquire and exercise power is as dangerous and potentially volatile as its divine source.

A scene reminiscent of that in *Grímnismál*, though lighter in tone, occurs in a strange passage of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, in which Óðinn deposes a king who intends to take advantage of his own wisdom to rid himself of an enemy unfairly.<sup>124</sup> This enemy, a man conveniently named Gestumblindi, cannot hope to better the king in a verbal contest. That said, he is apparently wiser than the king in one way, as he has sense enough to realize his own limitations. He calls on Óðinn for help, for which he offers him all kinds of compensation. Óðinn takes on his clothes and appearance

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<sup>120</sup> ‘Drunk are you Geirroðr, you’ve drunk too much, you lose much when you lose my favour and that of all the Einheriar. Much have I said, but you remember little of it; your friend has deceived you’. *Grí* v. 51–2 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 67–8; and transl. Larrington, p. 5).

<sup>121</sup> Larrington, ‘*Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*’, p. 74.

<sup>122</sup> ‘I see the sword of my friend lying all covered in blood’. *Grí* v. 52 ll. 4–6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 68; and transl. Larrington, p. 59).

<sup>123</sup> *Grí* prose prologue (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 68).

<sup>124</sup> *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, ch. 10 (ed. Tolkien, pp. 36–51). For general background to this saga see Andrews, ‘*Hervarar Saga*’.

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and goes to court in his stead. There King Heiðrekr foolishly suggests a trial by riddle to Óðinn, whom he takes to be Gestumblindi. A wisdom contest ensues, with the riddles in verse and the answers in prose. Óðinn at last puts an end to the contest with the same question he uses to stump Vafþrúðnir in another eddic wisdom contest, though rephrased:<sup>125</sup>

Hvat mælti Óðinn í eyra Baldri,  
áðr hann væri á bál hafiðr?<sup>126</sup>

At this point Heiðrekr acknowledges Óðinn's identity and attacks him with his sword. But Óðinn pronounces his death sentence, which he declares is a punishment for attacking him and for failing to recognize him (and possibly Gestumblindi) as *saklausan*.<sup>127</sup> He then flies off.

The similarities between this episode and *Vafþrúðnismál* are especially striking. If the saga episode is not modelled directly on that poem, it does at the very least make use of the same conventions of the Odinic wisdom contest. Like the giant, the king's fatal flaw is overconfidence in his own wisdom. As in *Grímnismál*, Óðinn's purpose in the saga is to promote his favourite by punishing another, teaching the king a lesson he must pay for with his life. It is a particularly apt context for the one Old Norse poetic riddle collection. The purpose of riddles is to make the solver consider something familiar in a new way.<sup>128</sup> The solutions are accordingly a range of mundane things: most are either natural phenomena or common manmade objects. More specific mythological references, however, are also woven in and serve as hints that the contest too is more than it appears to be. The riddles are only loosely linked and their order and number varies between manuscripts,<sup>129</sup> but there are some hints of dramatic progression that arise from the content and arrangement of the riddles within the narrative context. In this way, the episode unfolds similarly to *Grímnismál* and *Vafþrúðnismál*. The solutions to the riddles are given in table 2 below in the order in which they appear in manuscripts of the R and H redactions of the saga

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<sup>125</sup> On the relationship between the two see Heusler and Ranisch, *Eddica Minora*, p. xciii.

<sup>126</sup> 'What did Óðinn say in Baldr's ear before he was lifted on the pyre?'. *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (ed. Tolkien, p. 50). Cf. *Vafþr* v. 54 ll. 4–6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 55; and transl. Larrington, p. 48): 'hvat mælti Óðinn, áðr á bál stigi, siálfr í eyra syni?' ('What did Óðinn say into the ear of his son before he mounted the pyre?').

<sup>127</sup> 'Guiltless'. *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (ed. Tolkien, p. 51).

<sup>128</sup> Cf. Wilcox, "'Tell Me What I Am'", pp. 47–51.

<sup>129</sup> The complicated manuscript transmission of the saga is fully explored in Jeff Love's forthcoming PhD dissertation.

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respectively.<sup>130</sup> A couple of riddles have Óðinn as part of their solution, but most have nothing to do with him explicitly.<sup>131</sup>

The first helpful indication of the speaker's identity comes with the one riddle that does clearly suggest supernatural ability. Óðinn describes a creature with ten tongues, twenty eyes and forty feet. Heiðrekr correctly guesses the pregnant sow just outside and orders it to be slaughtered.<sup>132</sup> When it is confirmed that it did indeed carry nine piglets, the king finally becomes suspicious of whom Gestumblindi might be. In the H redaction of the saga, this riddle occurs early on, and on the whole the pacing is more drawn-out, perhaps in order to extend the dramatic tension of the scene that (in this redaction) serves as the conclusion and climax of the saga.<sup>133</sup> The sequence in R, however, holds it back until near the end of the contest, where the riddles most suggestive of the speaker's identity are clustered, making for a much more sudden revelation. A series of riddles about the waves leads up to the telling riddle of the sow and piglets. As it is a question about waves that tips off the *vǫlva* in *Baldrs draumar*, it is reasonable to assume that the wave riddles are meant to serve a similar function. Their repetition at the start of the final sequence signals the start of Óðinn's unveiling in the same way that his list of *heiti* does in *Grímnismál*.

Table 2: Riddle Solutions in the H and R redactions of *Hervarar saga*.<sup>134</sup>

H Riddles	R Riddles
1. Ale	1. Ale
2. Going across a bridge	2. Going across a bridge
3. Dew	3. Dew
4. Goldsmith's hammer	4. Goldsmith's hammer
5. Fog	5. Smith's bellows
6. Anchor	6. Spider
7. Raven, dew, fish and waterfall	7. Leek
8. Leek	8. Obsidian
9. Smith's bellows	9. Swan
10. Hail and rain	10. Angelica
11. Dung-beetle	11. Ice-floe
12. Sow with nine piglets	12. Ítrekr and Andaðr playing <i>tafl</i>

<sup>130</sup> These are the two redactions of the saga reflected in medieval manuscripts (Andrews, 'Hervarar Saga' (1914), p. 363).

<sup>131</sup> The answers to the riddles are entered in some (though not all) manuscripts of the poem, and vary somewhat between copies: for comment on solutions see Turville-Petre, *Hervarar saga*, pp. 78–82.

<sup>132</sup> *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (ed. Turville-Petre, p. 49).

<sup>133</sup> Andrews points out that this ending, as well as the extension of the scene with seven extra riddles, fits with the emphasis of the Hauksbók title *Heiðreks saga ens vitra*. (Andrews, pp. 367–8).

<sup>134</sup> Taken from *Eddica Minora*, ed. Heusler and Ranisch, pp. 106–120. For a fuller summary of the manuscript variants, see Andrews, 'Hervarar Saga' (1914), pp. 363–378 and (1920), pp. 93–100; and *Heiðreks saga*, ed. Helgason, esp. pp. lxxxii–lxxxiii.

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H Riddles	R Riddles
13. Arrow	13. <i>Hnefatafl</i>
14. Spider	14. Fire
15. Sun	15. Fog
16. Obsidian	16. <i>Hnefatafl</i> piece
17. Swan	17. Shield
18. Angelica	18. Grouse
19. <i>Hnefatafl</i>	19. Waves 1 (in kenning)
20. Grouse	20. Waves 2
21. Waves 1 (in kenning)	21. Waves 3 (in kenning)
22. Waves 2	22. Duck nest in jaw-bone of ox
23. Waves 3 (in kenning)	23. Anchor
24. Waves 4	24. Waves 4
25. Ice-floe <sup>135</sup>	25. Squealing sow and piglets
26. <i>Hnefatafl</i> piece	26. Sow with nine piglets
27. Shield	27. Cow
28. Duck nest in jaw-bone of ox	28. Hawk carrying eider-duck to crags
29. Cow	29. Óðinn on Sleipnir
30. Fire	30. Óðinn's words to Baldr
31. Linen and weaving sley	
32. Ítrekr and Andaðr playing <i>tafl</i>	
33. Squealing sow and piglets	
34. Embers	
35. Hawk carrying eider-duck to crags	
36. Óðinn on Sleipnir	
37. Óðinn's words to Baldr	

In answering the penultimate riddle in both sequences, Heiðrekr is finally successful in identifying the mythological in the mundane. He is fully aware then, when the final question comes, of why he loses the wisdom contest. The differences between the manuscripts suggest that the riddles themselves, whatever their origin might be, are clearly the focus of this episode. Variation in the order of the riddles changes the way the scene plays out. In each version, though it is more pronounced in the R redaction, the saga author puts them to use to create a conventional scene – modelled on poems like *Grímnismál* and *Vafþrúðnismál* – that integrates them into the narrative in order to give meaning to Heiðrekr's ignoble death.<sup>136</sup> Though Óðinn raises kings to power, he can strip them of it just as easily by exploiting their own folly when their wisdom fails. If this is the fate of the greatest of men, it is all the more true for the audience of the poem.

<sup>135</sup> See p. 152 n. 42.

<sup>136</sup> On the confrontation scene typical to these poems and its ramifications for performance of the texts, see Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*, pp. 275–80.

CONCLUSION

Óðinn and his prowess reverberate through all the poems considered here. Openly or covertly, he lends authority and personality to the acquisition and dispensation of wisdom in a range of contexts. The one-eyed god were far from omnipotent or, despite his wondrous knowledge, omniscient. Many of his appearances illustrate the painful extremes he went to in order to achieve wisdom. Above all, he had to be crafty in debate to win knowledge from the living, and fearless of personal risk to win it from the dead. Getting wisdom was, in every sense of the word, a pain, and Óðinn's difficult quest for wisdom emblemized for readers and listeners the dangers and challenges of all interpersonal interaction. Their plight was even more vividly mirrored in eddic scenes of Óðinn offering wisdom to others. Never was the point simply to offer wisdom: strings were always attached, and might bind into a noose around the necks of the unwary. For Óðinn as for men, wisdom in itself was a valuable commodity – so valuable that it had to be cherished, defended and shared only with the greatest caution.

## V

# Traditional Forms and Christian Authority

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines how the features associated with eddic wisdom poetry was from time to time revived in the thirteenth century and after under the influence of new literary forms.<sup>1</sup> These ‘new’ elements had themselves enjoyed a long period of growth within Scandinavia. Inspired by the traditions of classical Latin education,<sup>2</sup> Scandinavians were quick to analyse and systematize their inherited, native poetics using the tools of medieval literate culture. This process had begun by the mid-twelfth century, when *Háttalykill* was composed. It offered a key to metres illustrated with allusions to heroic legend. In doing so, it demonstrated the value of an understanding of traditional forms and conventions as part of the skill and innovation of poets in the present who continued to innovate in skaldic measures. It influenced Snorri Sturluson’s metrical exemplar *Háttatal*,<sup>3</sup> which is based around a praise poem for Hákon, king of Norway (1217–63), and his uncle Earl Skúli (d. 1240). It lists, briefly describes and gives examples of different metres. The arrangement of verse types is based on hierarchical considerations, and the focus is again on skaldic forms, with *dróttkvætt* given pride of place.<sup>4</sup> Anthony Faulkes has argued that Snorri was well aware of the development of more complex forms from older eddic types and held back *fornyrðislag* and the other principal eddic verse types until the end of his treatise because their relative simplicity rendered them less fit for courtly composition.<sup>5</sup> The arrangement of different verse types in *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál* further demonstrates Snorri’s effort to draw a chronological

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<sup>1</sup> On this revival and its consequences for sources of Norse mythology, see Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North*, pp. 192–231; and Tulinus, *Matter of the North*.

<sup>2</sup> For general discussion of medieval Latin education, see Riché, *Écoles et enseignement*; Paré, Brunet and Tremblet, *Renaissance du XIIe siècle*; and Holtz, *Donat et la tradition*. The arrival of this tradition in Iceland is generally surveyed in Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*. One important early manifestation of it is the *First Grammatical Treatise*, commonly dated to the twelfth century: *First Grammatical Treatise*, ed. Hrein Benediktsson.

<sup>3</sup> See Quinn, ‘Eddu List’; and Gade, ‘Háttalykill’.

<sup>4</sup> It has been noted that many of these are invented, or innovative types, not well attested in the actual corpus of skaldic verse (see Poole, ‘Metre and Metrics’, p. 282).

<sup>5</sup> Faulkes, *Háttatal*, pp. xxiii–iv.

distinction between skaldic and eddic verse.<sup>6</sup> According to his scheme, poetry describing the words and deeds of men and supernatural creatures of the ancient past belonged to eddic measures, which were evocative of this antiquity.<sup>7</sup> The evidence of widespread eddic quotation in the *fornaldarsögur* confirms that this impression was widely held in the later medieval period.<sup>8</sup> The Codex Regius of eddic poetry similarly confines its content to ancient subject matter and the collection as a whole provides evidence for a more nuanced view of the associations of individual eddic metres.<sup>9</sup>

But although they were clearly associated with the ancient Germanic past and the pre-Christian mythological realm, eddic compositions continued to be produced as late as the fourteenth century. Some of these later manifestations may represent genuine attempts to counterfeit an ancient-seeming composition, but more often it seems that poets found the language and conventions of the past conducive to the aims of their present. Poets adapted eddic techniques to new subject matter, drawn from Christian and other medieval European literary traditions. A handful of such late compositions appear to align themselves consciously with the traditional genre of wisdom poetry. These poems – *Sólarljóð*, *Hugsvinnsmál*, *Alvíssmál* and *Svipdagsmál* – will be the focus of this chapter (along with the associated skaldic poem *Málsháttakvæði*). The very preservation of this material is remarkable and the active – one might say artificial – attempts to revive the tradition to which it bears witness are even more contrived. That is not to say there was a single unified cultural or intellectual movement that produced them: the inter-relationships of these poems are extremely complicated. What is clear is that poets with very diverse starting materials in several instances chose eddic poetry as the medium for their work. In so doing they reveal the associations which continued to surround eddic verse centuries after conversion. There are many reasons for this survival and they vary from one poem to the next, but one is certainly recurring: they all deal with wisdom of questionable value, and each of these poems dwells consciously on the nature of the authority behind their wisdom. Although they belong to the Christian period, the source of the wisdom is never straightforwardly God himself.

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<sup>6</sup> See Clunies Ross, 'Snorri's Edda as Medieval Religionsgeschichte', pp. 646–7; and Faulkes, *Prologue and Gylfaginning*, p. 66.

<sup>7</sup> On general views of Germanic antiquity and its reconciliation with classical and Christian learning, see, *inter alia*, Faulkes, 'Descent from the Gods', 'Pagan Sympathy'; and, for an earlier comparison, Hunter, 'Germanic and Roman Antiquity'.

<sup>8</sup> See Clunies Ross, *History of Old Norse*, pp. 10–12.

<sup>9</sup> See for instance, Quinn, 'Verseform and Voice'.

This contrasts with mainstream Christian wisdom literature, which often invokes the absolute authority of God and His word as derived from the Holy Scriptures. King Solomon, who himself came to be a prominent figure in the Judeo-Christian wisdom tradition,<sup>10</sup> (reputedly) crystallized the prevailing sentiment with the final words of Ecclesiastes (XII.13–14): ‘Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgement, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil’.<sup>11</sup> Based on the principle of divine revelation, Christianity allowed for the possibility of direct communication between an all-knowing, benevolent God and human beings, who are the sole beneficiaries in the exchange. The actual process of this revelation, however, was in some cases acknowledged to be more problematic, or at least more complicated. It is no small thing for men to claim direct inspiration from God, and it potentially put them at odds with Christian ideals of humility. Consequently it is no wonder that conventions such as anonymity and the expression of extreme humility became so common in religious medieval literature. New compositions asserting wisdom or insight went unattributed, or else were foisted onto names of acknowledged authority such as Isidore of Seville (d. 636), Donatus (fl. c. 350) or Virgil (70–19 BC).<sup>12</sup> In Scandinavia these topoi even came to be used in skaldic poetry, traditionally an extremely self-aggrandising form of verse. The role of the poet as an authority for the transmission of wisdom with potentially eternal consequences could be a dangerous one.

This problem is particularly well illustrated by the poems considered here. *Málsháttakvæði* offers a lighthearted gathering of proverbs in a quirky Orcadian composition influenced by the romance tradition. Here the poet’s presence is less overt than in many skaldic compositions, but still more so than is the case in eddic, and he creates a strange but effective and witty blend of skaldic and eddic features predicated on his own unfortunate experiences. New ways of considering poets and their work in this case mesh with established poetic forms. Much the same is true of *Sólarljóð* and *Hugsvinnsmál*, though the ‘new’ perspectives to the material they adopt are much more explicitly Christian in character. These two poems are conventionally

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<sup>10</sup> Anlezark, *Old English Dialogues*, pp. 12–15.

<sup>11</sup> *King James Version*, ed. Carroll and Prickett, p. 760 (cf. *Biblia sacra*, ed. Weber, pp. 996–7).

<sup>12</sup> Law, ‘When Is Donatus Not Donatus?’; and Naismith, ‘Antiquity, Authority and Religion’.

dated to the late thirteenth century, or possibly the fourteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Both share significant similarities with the other eddic wisdom poems, although they also belong more obviously within the greater context of the Latinate Christian literary tradition. This is most straightforwardly true in the case of *Hugsvinnsmál*, the loose Old Norse translation of the *Disticha Catonis*. *Sólarljóð* is slightly more difficult to define generically, but it certainly makes use of the convention of the dream vision, a common medieval literary device. The poets of *Hugsvinnsmál* and *Sólarljóð* must, therefore, have been men of some education,<sup>14</sup> though not necessarily of commensurate imagination or poetic skill. It was not only religious motivation as such that led poets to use traditional conventions in order to contextualize their work in terms of different kinds of authority. *Alvíssmál* and *Svipdagsmál* situate the events they present in the mythological realm, without reference to the poet's present in eddic tradition. Whether or not they were intended to pass as ancient, these and the other poems under discussion here rely on familiarity with and particularly understanding of these traditional worlds to express their own meanings.

WISDOM AND ROMANCE: *MÁLSHÁTTAKVÆÐI*

Such familiarity is called upon by the most unusual example of a literate, Christian composition making conscious use of the traditional conventions of eddic wisdom poetry (amongst other genres). In the Orcadian *Málsháttakvæði*, the poetic voice, unhappy in love, echoes Donne's hope that 'if I could draw my pains through rhyme's vexations, I should them allay'.<sup>15</sup> Roberta Frank, the text's most recent editor, has characterized its main achievement as enlarging 'a current European mode, the courtly-love satire with touches of backroom humor'.<sup>16</sup> The poem is generally

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<sup>13</sup> On the dating of *Sól* and *Hsv*, see Larrington and Robinson, '*Sólarljóð*', pp. 287–8; and Wills and Würth, '*Hugsvinnsmál*', p. 358.

<sup>14</sup> Frederic Amory ('Norse-Christian Syncretism', p. 254) imagines, for *Sól*, a cleric 'who was equally conversant with Church doctrine and the pagan culture of literary Iceland' and Larrington ('Neo-Paganism', pp. 182–3) more specifically suggests that his knowledge of eddic tradition might have been 'acquired perhaps from reading Snorri or earlier versions of the poems in the Codex Regius'. The extent to which the two cultures could be and are merged in the poem has elsewhere been viewed more critically: see references at nn. 28 and 50–2.

<sup>15</sup> *The Triple Fool* ll. 8–9. The poem is available in many accessible editions; for one example see *Complete English Poems*, ed. Smith, p. 81.

<sup>16</sup> Frank, 'Sex, Lies and *Málsháttakvæði*', p. 22.

attributed to Bjarni Kolbeinsson (d. 1222),<sup>17</sup> a man from an aristocratic family who was bishop of the Orkney Islands. The unique intellectual climate in which he flourished provided a perfect context for the poem's confident and ambitious innovations.<sup>18</sup>

These are not limited to the poem's framing and tone; they also extend to its content, which is made up of proverbial sayings.<sup>19</sup> This most traditional subject material is treated in a very unconventional way. The metre, loose as it is, is skaldic and some of the conventions of skaldic poetry (as summarized in Chapter II), most notably the poet's frequent self-reference, are also present. Foreign as such features may be in some senses, eddic as well as skaldic precedents can be found. The juxtaposition of an individual voice and almost disembodied impersonal observations is found in eddic wisdom poetry. The poetic voice of Óðinn in *Hávamál* provides the most varied examples as he moves back and forth between generalized observations and his own experiences. Their inclusion serves a variety of functions in the poem. In 'Rúnatal' and 'Ljóðatal' especially, he seeks to establish himself as an authority on the most allusive and valuable wisdom by explaining how he came by it, and then expounding on the power it gives him. More often in the gnomic poem and in what John McKinnell has termed *Hávamál B* (stanzas 84 and 91–110),<sup>20</sup> individual experience is used to illustrate a principle. Thus a series of gnomes on the theme of friendship culminates in a personal testament to its value:

Ungr var ec forðom, fór ec einn saman  
þá varð ec villr vega;  
auðigr þóttomz, er ec annan fann,  
maðr er mannz gaman.<sup>21</sup>

In a smaller number of instances, Óðinn cites his personal experience when it is apparently incongruous with the connected gnomic pronouncement. The clearest example occurs in stanzas 12–14, which advise against drunkenness and then allude

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<sup>17</sup> See Fidjestøl, 'Bjarni Kolbeinsson'.

<sup>18</sup> This context has been well illuminated by recent scholarship. See Jesch, 'Norse Literature in the Orkney Earldom', esp. pp. 79–82; Lindow, 'Narrative and the Nature of Skaldic Poetry', pp. 109–14; and Hermann Pálsson, 'Florilegium in Norse from Medieval Orkney'.

<sup>19</sup> For context see also Finnur Jónsson, 'Oldislandske ordsprog og talemåder'.

<sup>20</sup> McKinnell, '*Hávamál B*'. McKinnell argues for the influence of the classical Latin poet Ovid's *Ars amatoria* on this portion of the poem.

<sup>21</sup> 'I was young once, I travelled alone, then I found myself going astray; rich I thought myself when I met someone else, for man is the joy of man'. *Hávnm* v. 47 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 24; and transl. Larrington, p. 20).

to the mythological episode in which Óðinn gained the mead of poetry.<sup>22</sup> In this way the absolute truth and universality of the maxims is qualified or called into question, and attention is drawn to the limitations of mankind's control over the world.

It is this frustration of the individual who fails to master external agencies that provides the impetus for the poet's gathering up of proverbial sayings in *Málsháttakvæði*. The act of contextualising his experience within greater patterns of human behaviour should help him to overcome his suffering. Yet he indicates from the outset that the exercise is meant to be self-effacing rather than serious by referring to the proverbs he collects as *geipun*.<sup>23</sup> The poet relies on the audience's expectations of the solemnity of poetic proverbial utterance in order to convey the effect of his wit. His clever irreverence can expose established wisdom – and his own experiences along with it – as common and trite. This perspective allows him to mitigate his grief with humour and an acceptance of the conditions of human life, however absurd.

The form of this poem too evokes the grandest skaldic tradition of the day,<sup>24</sup> even as it stubbornly refuses to live up to the poetic standards that the author's cleverness suggests he is perfectly capable of. The metre too, though not eddic, mimics some features of *ljóðahátt*, especially as it is deployed in poems purporting to express ancient truisms. In eddic wisdom poetry syntactic units are short, normally confined to the half stanza, and repetitive patterns are favoured over variation. *Málsháttakvæði* takes this to new extremes, with a more or less one-to-one correspondence between proverbs and four-stress lines. Couplets are linked by end rhyme and often, though not always, thematically. Some stanzas have more internal coherence than others, with a single theme predominating. Stanza 7 for instance, is made up of a list of brave men who triumphed over a *mannraun*.<sup>25</sup>

If we take a view of the poem as a whole, we find that clear links between successive stanzas are few and often vague. While causal relationships between stanzas and half stanzas are often left unexpressed in wisdom poetry, this is normally compensated for in poetic list-making by the use of devices like verbal echoes and numeration. *Málsháttakvæði* does have a refrain which occurs at the expected intervals, and references the love complaint that frames the poem. Yet only in the

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<sup>22</sup> See Larrington, *Store of Common Sense*, pp. 24–5; and Quinn, 'Liquid Knowledge', pp. 196–8. For fuller discussion of this passage see Chapters III and IV.

<sup>23</sup> 'Nonsense'. *Máls* v. 1 l. 7 (*Skj* IIB, 183; and transl. Frank, p. 23).

<sup>24</sup> Frank ('Sex, Lies and *Málsháttakvæði*', p. 13) notes the conformity to some conventions of the *drápa* form and an overall tripartite structure.

<sup>25</sup> 'Test of manhood'. *Máls* v. 7 l. 8 (*Skj* IIB, 139; and transl. Frank, p. 24).

final occurrence of the refrain, in stanza 20, does it actually appear in the context of gnomic observations about love. In the preceding instances, the poet is true to his boast that the deployment of these observations makes the structure of the whole even more jarring:

Stefjum verða at stæla brag,  
stuttligt hefk á kvæði lag,  
ella mun þat þykkja þula,  
þanning nær sem ek henda mula.<sup>26</sup>

Context, in short, is everything, and the way that stanzas are ordered and arranged can be as essential to the interpretation of the wisdom they contain as its actual expression. Thus this poem demonstrates an ability to create a kind of order out of the apparent chaos of the human and natural worlds. Bjarni's purpose, however, is just the opposite and he plays up the haphazard element of proverbial collections in order to express his own restlessness of mind.<sup>27</sup>

*Málsháttakvæði* is the work of a poet learned in the traditions of the past as well as those of his own day, and who was comfortable moving between the different modes. He turns the conventions of wisdom poetry and skaldic composition on their heads, demonstrating that while he might be inspired by tradition he is not a slave to it. The poetic conventions and sayings of eddic tradition are neither viewed with reverence nor denounced as outmoded, and there is no sign of the antiquarian anxiety about their preservation and proper interpretation that characterizes the attitude of the near contemporary Snorri Sturluson towards his eddic source material.

All the eddic poems of the Christian, literate era examined here show a different but closely related series of developments, in which a verse-form redolent of pre-Christian antiquity to medieval Icelanders such as Snorri was rehabilitated and brought up to date. In Iceland, one might say, pre-Christian and later material achieved a particularly happy co-existence, manifested on the one hand by continued interest in eddic verse on the part of Snorri and certain manuscript copyists, and on the other by rarer yet significant literary re-imaginings in eddic metre which reveal the evolving thought-world of medieval Iceland.

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<sup>26</sup> 'Poetry has to be fitted with refrains (I have an abrupt manner in this verse) else it shall seem a rigmarole, almost as if I were grasping at crumbs'. *Máls* v. 11 ll. 1–4 (*Skj* IIB, 140; and transl. Frank, p. 26).

<sup>27</sup> Heusler, *Altgermanische Dichtung*, p. 74.

SÓLARLJÓÐ

The search for the sources of inspiration for the most religious eddic poem, *Sólarljóð*, is complicated by the poet's wide learning in both native and foreign tradition. This owes in part to the means by which the poet sought to align and rearrange these traditions for his own purposes, freely mingling imagery and moving between the usually distinct genres explored in Chapter II.<sup>28</sup> Variety, moreover, was present in the tradition of vision literature itself. The genre of visions (including dreams) had a very long and productive history, and influential European literary visions date from long before the advent of Christianity. In book six of his *De republica*, Cicero (d. 43 BC), for example, relates a dream vision of the cosmos and the place of Rome and Carthage within it, which he ascribes to Scipio Africanus (d. 129 BC).<sup>29</sup> Part didacticism, part philosophical and political tract, the text makes full use of the genre's ability to divest the author of personal responsibility for the views put forth, while at the same time imbuing them with an ineluctable supernatural authority.<sup>30</sup> It also allows for a grander perspective in which to examine 'human involvement in cosmic order, considering how earthly behaviour affects the eternal life of the soul'.<sup>31</sup>

Always a central human concern, the vision remained a prominent literary and theological device throughout the Christian Middle Ages – indeed, the vision-portion of Cicero's text, which came to be termed the *Somnium Scipionis*, is the only part known to have been widely read and copied in the Middle Ages.<sup>32</sup> It was one of several key texts which mediated a range of classical, Jewish, early Christian and other intellectual traditions for medieval readers.<sup>33</sup> Certainly from a medieval perspective, the single most significant precedent would have been the biblical Apocalypse of John, or *Book of Revelation*, which treats the end of world and the hereafter at much greater length than any other portion of the holy scriptures. It purports to be the vision of John,<sup>34</sup> whose mistaken identification with the apostle led

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<sup>28</sup> The *Sól*-poet's imaginative treatment of his subject matter has recently been asserted in Larrington, 'Freyja and the Organ Stool', esp. p. 192.

<sup>29</sup> Above all in the context of the commentary on it by Macrobius: see *Ambrosii Theodosii Macrobii Commentarii*, ed. Willis.

<sup>30</sup> Spearing, *Medieval Dream Poetry*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>31</sup> Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, p. 124.

<sup>32</sup> On its extensive manuscript preservation and impact, see Armisen-Marchetti, *Commentaire au Songe de Scipion I*, lxiv–lxxxviii.

<sup>33</sup> Ciccacese, *Visioni*, pp. 1–144; Dutton, *Politics of Dreaming*, pp. 1–22; Morgan, *Dante and the Medieval Other World*, pp. 1–107; and Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, pp. 58–65.

<sup>34</sup> On the (often very fine) distinction of different types of visions and dreams see Dinzelsbacher, *Vision und Visionsliteratur*, pp. 29–42 and 229–65. Different authors, such as St Augustine, elaborated very

to its inclusion in the biblical canon,<sup>35</sup> whence it reached a multitude of Christian readers down to the present day, its enigmatic and symbolic character evoking persistent fascination.<sup>36</sup> Elsewhere in the Bible the gravity and potentially heretical danger of claiming personal divine revelation is stressed. It is alluded to in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians: 'scio hominem in Christo ante annos quattuordecim sive in corpore nescio sive extra corpus nescio Deus scit raptum eiusmodi usque ad tertium caelum ... in paradysum et audivit arcana verba quae non licet homini loqui'.<sup>37</sup>

Even in the face of St Paul's warning, the dream vision form was extremely popular in the medieval period:<sup>38</sup> at least 225 instances have been documented from across Europe down to c. 1400.<sup>39</sup> Such visions of hellish horrors and paradisiacal pleasures began to be widespread in the early Middle Ages, when the relatively restricted scriptural discussion of the afterlife was still being developed.<sup>40</sup> The venerable Bede (d. 735), for example, included many dream visions in his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, and expanded substantially on one particular vision allegedly experienced by a Northumbrian layman named Drihthelm, and for the benefit of his audience explained how Drihthelm was shown the different parts of heaven and hell.<sup>41</sup> However, vision literature of various kinds only reached its zenith in the late Middle Ages, in the period between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, when the majority of these texts were composed,<sup>42</sup> including some of the most celebrated works of medieval literature such as much of Chaucer's early poetry and William Langland's *Vision of Piers Plowman*. Peter Dinzelbacher has shown how vision texts from the twelfth century and later tended to take on a more mystical character as shorter, often repeatable experiences which the visionary could foresee or

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detailed distinctions of vision and dream, related to views of thought, imagination and consciousness: see Dutton, *Politics of Dreaming*, pp. 5–22; and Gardiner, *Medieval Visions*, pp. xv–xxxiii.

<sup>35</sup> See Morris, *Book of Revelation*, pp. 27–34.

<sup>36</sup> On its background and impact, see McGinn, 'John's Apocalypse'.

<sup>37</sup> 'I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth; such a one caught up to the third heaven ... into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter'. II Cor. XII.2–4 (*Biblia sacra*, ed. Weber, p. 1800; *King James Version*, ed. Carroll and Prickett, p. 231).

<sup>38</sup> There are many general treatments of medieval dream visions. For a selection see Spearing, *Medieval Dream Poetry*; Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*; and Dinzelbacher, *Vision und Visionsliteratur*.

<sup>39</sup> Dinzelbacher, *Vision und Visionsliteratur*, pp. 11–28, and *Revelationes*, pp. 86–108.

<sup>40</sup> Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, pp. 243–72; and Ciccarese, *Visioni*, pp. 145–217. See for long-term developments Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, esp. pp. 1–44.

<sup>41</sup> Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* v.12 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 488–99).

<sup>42</sup> Lynch, *High Medieval Dream Vision*, p. 1.

even prepare for, and which focused more on the emotional effects of the experiences than hitherto.<sup>43</sup>

Heaven and hell feature prominently among these medieval visions, often in the form of a guided tour for the visionary.<sup>44</sup> The primary purpose of this genre was generally didactic, and instruction conveyed alongside descriptions of the eternal consequences of sin or virtue could prove a highly effective method of impressing the importance of repentance onto the audience.<sup>45</sup> They also allowed for more creative imaginings of the afterlife than might be permitted in descriptions conceived in waking life, and for exploration of the individual's relationship with the supernatural and the eternal. This type of discourse, so laden with symbolism, encouraged the use of wide-ranging allusions in order to achieve the supernatural resonance that the subject matter called for. Christian literature, particularly in the vernacular, could draw on native cultural traditions as well as the strictly religious and Latinate and vision literature, and often did so in unexpected ways.<sup>46</sup> The most famous example, and the earliest surviving in a Germanic vernacular, is the celebrated Old English poem *The Dream of the Rood*.<sup>47</sup> Here traditional heroic language and imagery are used to recast the scene of Christ's passion in a way that allows the audience – one which was probably much more attuned to the 'heroic' elements of Old English verse – to feel a closer affinity with their saviour, and to equip themselves for judgement day.<sup>48</sup>

The *Sólarljóð*-poet turned to native as well as European models in creating a very unusual work with a very conventional aim. The poem's vision of the afterlife builds on certain tropes and features of the wider Christian tradition of dream visions,<sup>49</sup> but also 'freely adapts the myths of the Eddas and the kennings of the skalds to the visions of a Christian seer'.<sup>50</sup> Unravelling the complex and frequently mysterious symbolism and references in *Sólarljóð* has proven a fascinating, if occasionally frustrating, task for scholars of Old Norse literature. Frederic Amory

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<sup>43</sup> Dinzelbacher, *Vision und Visionsliteratur*, esp. ch. 12–16.

<sup>44</sup> On the background to this see Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, esp. pp. 22–44 and 181–201; Kabir, *Paradise, Death, and Doomsday*, esp. pp. 1–110; and Owen, *Vision of Hell*.

<sup>45</sup> Patch, *Other World*, p. 89.

<sup>46</sup> For a later Scandinavian example, see *Draumkvæde* (ed. Liestøl).

<sup>47</sup> Swanton, *Dream of the Rood*.

<sup>48</sup> For just a selection of discussions see Conner, 'Religious Poetry'; Fleming, 'Dream of the Rood'; and Galloway, 'Dream-Theory', esp. pp. 476–81.

<sup>49</sup> Larrington, 'Neo-Paganism', pp. 181–3. The blend of Christian influences with local tradition is also surveyed in Wellendorf, *Kristelig visionslitteratur*, pp. 319–43.

<sup>50</sup> Amory, 'Norse-Christian Syncretism', p. 252.

and Carolyn Larrington in particular have illuminated the nature of the poem's syncretism of Christian and pre-Christian elements, which was achieved in such a way that it does not undermine the poem's orthodoxy.<sup>51</sup> These studies have naturally focused on the language and imagery of the second two thirds of the poem which contain the vision proper, although Larrington notes that native wisdom poetry clearly serves as the model for the first third of the poem. The relationship between all three portions has been most clearly explained by Bjarne Fidjestøl in his monograph on *Sólarljóð*. In it he offers a hermeneutic reading of the poem which identifies a coherent, overarching structure that brings a measure of unity.<sup>52</sup> Each section relies on its context within the whole for meaning, and Fidjestøl therefore characterizes them as stages marking a progression towards eternity: life or this world, death or transition, and afterlife or the hereafter.<sup>53</sup>

This structure is not evident, of course, from the beginning of *Sólarljóð*. The vision does not begin until nearly halfway through the poem and until that point it is far from clear that the poem will ultimately align itself with this genre. *Sólarljóð* begins *in media re* with third person narration:

Fé ok fjörvi rænti fyrða kind  
sá inn grimmi greppr.<sup>54</sup>

This opening is deliberately ambiguous, and invites the audience to understand it as the start of a narrative poem, or at least a narrative frame, and speculate about the genre of the poem. The story is continued over the next six stanzas and it is not until stanza 8 that an actual gnomic statement occurs to confirm the nature of the preceding tale as a moral exemplum. The archetypal nature of the scene is hinted at, however, as no personal names are given,<sup>55</sup> and the two characters are instead described in terms of pronouns and descriptions like *inn grimmi greppr* and *inn dæsti maðr*.<sup>56</sup> This type of formulation is closely paralleled in the eddic gnomic pronouncements on advisable behaviour in poems like *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál*.

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*; and Larrington, 'Neo-Paganism'. For more general discussion, see also Foote, 'Observations on "Syncretism"'. For an alternative view of the significance of the poem's syncretism see Tate, 'Confrontation of Paganism and Christianity'.

<sup>52</sup> This is laid out in Fidjestøl, *Sólarljóð*, pp. 19–34.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>54</sup> 'The fierce man stole property and life from the offspring of men'. *Sól* v. 1 ll. 1–3 (ed. and transl. Larrington and Robinson, p. 296).

<sup>55</sup> On the possible interpretation of the nouns *greppr* and *gestr* as allegorical personal names, see Björn Ólsen, '*Sólarljóð*', pp. 26–7; and Fidjestøl, *Sólarljóð*, p. 21.

<sup>56</sup> 'The fierce man'; and 'the weary man'. *Sól* v. 1 l. 3 and v. 3 l. 2 (ed. and transl. Larrington and Robinson, pp. 296–7).

It is certainly *Hávamál* that provides the closest parallel to this scene, and to the first section of the poem as a whole.<sup>57</sup> *Hávamál* concentrates initially on the danger faced by the guest who comes to an unfamiliar place and puts his life and welfare into the hands of another, whose motivations are unknown. The pattern is inverted in *Sólarljóð*, as it turns out that contrary to everything the audience is led to expect, it is the robber who dies at the hands of his guest. The message here, which recurs several times, is that the dictates of moral law can be counterintuitive and even appear foolish, but they ultimately secure eternal rewards. This unexpected perspective on events is evident from the way the murder is described.

Upp hinn stóð; ilt hann hugði;  
eigi var þarfsamliga þegit;  
synð hans svall; sofanda myrði  
fróðan fjölvarran.<sup>58</sup>

Hence the designation of *fróðr* can be read in light of the previous stanza as a reference to the robber's awareness both of God's demand that the *móðr* should be treated well and of his own unworthy, sinful state.<sup>59</sup> The robber's characterization as *fjölvarr*, however, is a little harder to swallow, as he has gone to sleep and left himself vulnerable. While it has been noted that the guest turned to him with *hræddu hjarta*,<sup>60</sup> the robber is never said to harbour similar concerns about his guest's intentions. His shocking disregard for his physical safety is therefore seen paradoxically as the height of good sense, as it secures his ascent to heaven after death – an outcome his previously sinful life would have left in serious doubt. The episode as a whole serves to confirm the cultural value of hospitality, with a decidedly Christian slant. In this way the poem signals from the outset an interest in the fact that human actions in the temporal world have eternal consequences.

The dangers inherent in human interaction encapsulated in the conventional scene of a stranger's entry into the hall are similarly explored in other eddic wisdom poems. In both *Grímnismál* and *Vafþrúðnismál*, hall owners secure their own doom

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<sup>57</sup> Ólsen, 'Sólarljóð', p. 25; and Fidjestøl, *Sólarljóð*, ch. 3 both see these parallels as evidence of the direct influence of *Hávám.* Margaret Clunies Ross (review of Fidjestøl, *Sólarljóð*, p. 113) warns against making too much of their similarities by concentrating on comparisons with *Hávám* at the expense of other potential parallels.

<sup>58</sup> 'That one [the guest] got up; he had evil in mind; it [the host's generosity] was not received gratefully; his sin swelled up; he murdered the wise, very cautious sleeping man'. *Sól* v. 5 (ed. and transl. Larrington and Robinson, p. 299).

<sup>59</sup> 'Weary'. *Sól* v. 4 l. 2 (ed. and transl. Larrington and Robinson, p. 298).

<sup>60</sup> 'A fearful heart'. *Sól* v. 3 l. 4 (ed. and transl. Larrington and Robinson, p. 297).

by misinterpreting the relationship between host and guest. In the former, as in the opening sequence of *Hávamál*, the story reinforces cultural values of hospitality through the exposition of conditions that could undermine it.<sup>61</sup> *Vafþrúðnismál* cautions against assuming too much about others, a concern also repeatedly echoed in *Hávamál*, particularly in stanzas 132 to 135, which may well allude to a similar Odinic encounter.<sup>62</sup> The consequences might involve death, but unlike *Sólarljóð* these poems do not look beyond it. In this way the poet behind *Sólarljóð* seeks not so much to supplant traditional, earthly wisdom, as to extend its view.

A very similar pattern recurs in another of the *exempla*. It begins in stanza 19 with a gnomic pronouncement:

Óvinum þínum trú þú aldri,  
þótt fagrt mæli fyr þér;  
góðu þú heit; gótt er annars  
víti hafa at varnaði.<sup>63</sup>

As Larrington and Robinson note in their edition of the poem, the sentiment of this verse is most significantly paralleled in *Hávamál* stanzas 42 and 45 and *Sigrdrífumál* stanza 35.<sup>64</sup> In more general terms, the idea is, of course, very widely disseminated through Old Norse literature and beyond.<sup>65</sup> Yet when these poems address the issue of the fragility of peace, their perspective is strikingly individualistic.<sup>66</sup> Rather than offering suggestions as to how this social ill can be overcome on a general level, the focus is very much on the self-preservation of the person being advised. Duplicity and continued hostility respectively are accepted as the necessary consequences. This might seem somewhat out of place within a purely Christian moral framework, but Carolyne Larrington has recently interpreted this section of *Sólarljóð* with reference to situational ethics – that is, the fact that actions can be adjudged right or wrong depending on different, even entirely individualized, ethical backgrounds. These

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<sup>61</sup> On *Grí*, see Larrington ‘Cosmic History, Cosmic Geography’, pp. 73–4.

<sup>62</sup> *Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 38–9.

<sup>63</sup> ‘Never trust your enemies, though they speak fair words to you; promise good things; it is good to have another’s punishment as warning’. *Sól* v. 19 (ed. and transl. Larrington and Robinson, p. 308).

<sup>64</sup> Larrington and Robinson, ‘*Sólarljóð*’, p. 308.

<sup>65</sup> As they also note, Amory (‘Norse-Christian Syncretism’, pp. 264–5) suggests that a reference to Matt. XVI is intended.

<sup>66</sup> Critics have explained this apparent amorality in different ways. Van den Toorn (*Ethics and Morals*, pp. 21–32), presents the extreme view that *Hávam*, and to a lesser extent *Sigrdr*, represent a primitive, ‘rustic’ ethics that gave way to the superior world-view of the heroic poetry. More recent views have sought to mediate this judgement by emphasizing the focus on moderation (see Lindow, ‘*Hávamál*’) which need not be entirely at odds with the more social values of the family sagas (Andersson, ‘Displacement of the Heroic Ideal’, pp. 588–93).

different traditions were, as here, not always mutually exclusive: one situation might call for ‘traditional’ ethics, another for more conventional ‘Christian’ morality, even within the compass of a single poem.<sup>67</sup>

The poet of *Sólarljóð* continues to maintain his focus on the benefits of wisdom for the individual. The last two lines of the stanza suggest that what follows will contain a negative exemplum similar to the very straightforward one against the sin of pride that preceded it in stanzas 15–18.<sup>68</sup> Sörli, the protagonist of the narrative that follows in stanzas 20–4, acts foolishly according to the gnome in stanza 19 and the conventional interpretation of the common narrative type which is here being invoked.<sup>69</sup> In this way expectations are once again subverted, in that it is not the unwise man who suffers most in the end. Despite losing his life, like the robber he gains eternal bliss. The truth of the maxim is not at all disputed: he does indeed die as a result of his misplaced trust. Sörli’s adherence to the higher demands of Christian moral law, however, allow him to be saved and his enemy’s actions are exposed as the more foolish. It is the enemy whose *víti* is held up as a deterrent to those who would imitate his behaviour. Although it comes to a different conclusion about the best way to approach the conventional problem explored in *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál*, *Sólarljóð* presents its perspective as equally pragmatic. The reversal of fortunes only occurs after death, and even then the active involvement of another agent, God, is required to effect the change in outcome.<sup>70</sup>

With this initial series of exempla, the *Sólarljóð*-poet suggests a way of approaching the moral dictates of Christianity that reveals them to be as amenable to *mannvit* as the gnomes of traditional wisdom poetry. To do so he deliberately echoes the genre at the level of form, phrasing and rhetorical strategy. Even when some traditional wisdom is called into question, it is a matter of perspective rather than inherent truth-value. Impractical actions are shown to be wise, even shrewd, when viewed from the perspective of the soul after death. True pragmatism and self-interest must therefore incorporate consideration of the eternal ramifications of a given course of action. Just as the conditions of life on earth can be manipulated by

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<sup>67</sup> This was discussed recently by Larrington in a presentation at the Graduate Student Symposium in Old Norse in Finse, Norway in April 2007 entitled ‘New Thoughts on Old Wisdom’. My thanks are due to Carolyne for generously providing access to the text of her presentation in advance of publication.

<sup>68</sup> *Sól* vv. 15–18 (ed. and transl. Larrington and Robinson, pp. 306–7).

<sup>69</sup> *Pers. comm.* C. Larrington.

<sup>70</sup> See Brennecke, ‘Zur Strophe 78 der *Sólarljóð*’.

those wise enough to understand the minds of their fellows, those of eternal life can also be shaped by the man who knows something of the workings of God.

The poem therefore seeks to offer eternal wisdom that would normally only be accessible through the medium of divine revelation. It delays clarifying the narrative frame that makes such a transfer of wisdom possible, and so invites speculation on the nature of the narrative voice that can act as authority on such matters. The speaker is clearly human, as his references to personal experience indicate,<sup>71</sup> but they also suggest wisdom which experience of life in the world alone cannot account for. At several points he makes confident pronouncements on the divine judgement of the souls of the characters in his narratives.<sup>72</sup> Where the speaker cites evidence for his advice or observations in the poem, it is usually in the form of direct personal experience or a further gnomic truism.<sup>73</sup> The implication is that the passage of mankind into the afterlife also falls within the remit of the speaker's direct experience. This is confirmed in stanza 33, beginning the first-person account of the narrator's death and experience of the afterlife which makes up the celebrated core of the poem. The subjective individual account of life after death lends credence and poignancy to more generalized descriptions. Thus he describes his suffering through death:

Öllum lengri var sú in eina nótt,  
er ek lá stirðr á stráum;  
þat markir þat, er guð mælti,  
at maðr er moldu samr.<sup>74</sup>

This is not to say that the poem offers a clarified or simplified account of the afterworld. Only some of the extremely complex symbolism and allusions have been decoded.<sup>75</sup> Doubtless it was always intended to be more effective than illuminating, since, as with other visions of the afterlife, the purpose of *Sólarljóð* was ultimately to urge the living to reflect on the potential consequences of their own actions.

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<sup>71</sup> See *Sól* vv. 15, 24 and 29 (ed. and transl. Larrington and Robinson, pp. 305, 311 and 315).

<sup>72</sup> A more striking 'theological oddity' occurs in stanza 6, in which the guest is said to take the sins of the robber onto himself when he murders him: *Sól* v. 6 (ed. and transl. Larrington and Robinson, p. 299).

<sup>73</sup> These are normally expressed impersonally, as objective fact or occasionally as common lore (*þat kveða*): *Sól* v. 26 l. 6 (ed. and transl. Larrington and Robinson, pp. 312–13).

<sup>74</sup> 'That one night, when I lay stiff on the straw, was longer than all; that demonstrates what God has spoken, that man is the same as earth'. *Sól* v. 47 (ed. and transl. Larrington and Robinson, p. 328).

<sup>75</sup> Commentaries on the poem can be found in Ólsen, '*Sólarljóð*', pp. 27–64; Falk, *Sólarljóð*, pp. 1–54; and Fidjestøl, *Sólarljóð*.

For the same reason, the poet refrains from spelling out the narrative frame of *Sólarljóð*. It is properly addressed for the first time in stanza 78, although the interpretation of this stanza is both conceptually and syntactically difficult. Detlef Brennecke has proposed that it should be interpreted as a multi-layered reference to Christ, Mary, the Apostles and the day of judgement: a complex allusion which in itself might have presented a conundrum of theological ingenuity for readers hoping to derive benefit from the poem.<sup>76</sup> It may also refer to the immediate narrative context in the first two lines of the stanza. In stanza 78 – a particularly important stanza in forming general interpretations of the poem<sup>77</sup> – the speaker begins, ‘arfí, faðir einn ek ráðit hefí’.<sup>78</sup> As Larrington and Robinson note, the convention of a father addressing his son is common in wisdom poetry and the use of the word *arfí* suggests that the relationship is meant metaphorically rather than literally.<sup>79</sup> This is the usual use of this type of scene and can be paralleled, for instance, in the narrative frames of the Old English wisdom poems *Precepts* and *Vainglory*.<sup>80</sup> The speaker in both these cases is an old man, wise by virtue of his long experience of the world,<sup>81</sup> as well as his learning and goodness. In *Precepts* his benevolence is further conveyed by his description as a *fæder*.<sup>82</sup> This invokes the human family relationship that is metaphorically applied to God in Christianity and which likens the poem’s teaching to divine revelation.<sup>83</sup>

The conclusion of *Sólarljóð* likewise draws upon both the authority and emotional poignancy of this conventional scene. The use of the dual pronoun in the penultimate stanza as the father takes leave of his son until judgement day underlines the personal relationship which has prompted the extraordinary interference of the

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<sup>76</sup> Brennecke, ‘Zur Strophe 78 der *Sólarljóð*’, esp. pp. 100–8.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* (and the earlier references there cited), along with Ólsen, ‘*Sólarljóð*’, pp. 61–2; and Falk, *Sólarljóð*, pp. 50–4.

<sup>78</sup> ‘Heir, I alone, the father have interpreted’. *Sól* v. 78 ll. 1–2 (ed. and transl. Larrington and Robinson, p. 352). In their notes on this stanza, Larrington and Robinson argue for this reading, which takes *arfí* as a nominative rather than dative noun and the subject of direct address.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 325

<sup>80</sup> *Poems of Wisdom and Learning*, ed. and transl. Shippey, pp. 48–53 and 55–7.

<sup>81</sup> *Precepts* 1b and *Vainglory* 2 (*Poems of Wisdom and Learning*, ed. and transl. Shippey, pp. 48 and 54).

<sup>82</sup> *Precepts* 1a (*Poems of Wisdom and Learning*, ed. and transl. Shippey, p. 48).

<sup>83</sup> In *Vainglory* this equation is made explicit by revealing that the *frod wita* himself got his information from books which contained the teachings of a prophet (on the meaning of *witega*, see Bosworth and Toller, *Dictionary*, p. 1246). The poet calls upon the unimpeachability of this authority with a rhetorical flourish at the end of the poem: his words are true ‘gif me se witega ne leag’ (‘if the prophet does not deceive me’): *Vainglory* 81b (*Poems of Wisdom and Learning*, ed. and transl. Shippey, pp. 56–7).

dead with the living – a characteristic feature of many post-twelfth-century visions.<sup>84</sup> The son in turn is called upon to recount the poem *fyr kvikum*.<sup>85</sup> A final stanza makes it clear that the medium of this communication was a dream and confirms that the poem represents a fresh revelation to the world of *fyrða*.<sup>86</sup> By integrating a dream vision into the format of traditional eddic wisdom poetry the *Sólarljóð*-poet seeks to bridge the gulf between this world and the next. Even as he reveals Christian mystery, the poet is careful never to deviate from the limits of human knowledge.

HUGSVINNSMÁL

Faced with the task of rendering the wisdom of a Latin text more widely accessible to the Icelandic audiences of his own day, the *Hugsvinnsmál*-poet turned to the form associated with ancient wisdom in his native tongue. His rationale for doing so is more obvious than that of the *Sólarljóð*-poet. The source material in this case had its origins in pre-Christian Latin learning, in the form of the *Disticha Catonis*, probably first composed in the third century AD.<sup>87</sup> It was thus in some ways more clearly analogous to the traditional wisdom poetry of Scandinavia, with roots in the pre-Christian past, but with a continued literary life in the Christian present.<sup>88</sup> The long history of the *Disticha Catonis* had seen them evolve from a guide to civilized late antique manners into a fundament of Christian learning across the Latin West.<sup>89</sup> The *Disticha*'s format was highly amenable to addition and manipulation, and thus easily

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<sup>84</sup> See above, pp. 117–19.

<sup>85</sup> 'Before living people'. *Sól* v. 81 l. 3 (ed. and transl. Larrington and Robinson, p. 356).

<sup>86</sup> 'Men'. *Sól* v. 83 l. 4 (ed. and transl. Larrington and Robinson, p. 357).

<sup>87</sup> The *Disticha Catonis* had clearly been known in Scandinavia already, and stanza 26 at least had been translated into Old Norse separately (Wills and Würth, '*Hugsvinnsmál*', p. 358). The *First Grammatical Treatise* quotes both the Latin and an unascribed Old Norse translation (see Hreinn Benediktsson, *First Grammatical Treatise*, pp. 227–29). For general discussion of the relationship between *Hsv* and the *Disticha Catonis*, see Alexander, 'Studien über die *Hugsvinnsmál*'.

<sup>88</sup> On the original composition of the *Disticha Catonis*, see Sallmann, 'Moralistische Spruchdichtung', pp. 606–12; Schanz, 'Geschichte der römischen Literatur', pp. 34–41; and in general Hazelton, 'Christianization of Cato'.

<sup>89</sup> For their impact on late medieval literature and society, see Hazelton, esp. pp. 162–3, 'Chaucer and Cato'; Brunner, 'On some of the Vernacular Translations'; Nicholls, *Matter of Courtesy*, pp. 15–16 and 62; and Fleming, 'Muses of the Monastery', pp. 1085–6. For the general background of the *Disticha* in the context of education, see Riché, *Écoles et enseignement*, pp. 244–60.

adapted to suit new religious and moral tastes associated with the rise of Christianity.<sup>90</sup>

The Latin *Disticha* exist in many versions, but are most commonly arranged into four books, comprising between twenty-five and fifty two-line dicta. Each of these dicta consists of a couplet of Latin hexameters stating a physical, moral or behavioural truism which ought to be followed by the reader. In some recensions these four books are prefaced by an introductory epistle and a collection of fifty-six *breves sententiae*: these were probably additions made to the text in the course of the Middle Ages, though this was of course unknown to the writer of *Hugsvinnsmál*.<sup>91</sup>

The *Disticha*'s pearls of wisdom normally take the form of an imperative command to a directly addressed but generalized son from an equally generalized voice of authority. The introductory epistle notes the authorship of 'Cato' – sometimes identified with the famous Roman consul of that name (d. 149 BC), though this attribution was already seen to be impossible even in the ninth century.<sup>92</sup> Whichever 'Cato' was thought to have authored the *Disticha*, his intention as stated in the prefatory letter was to instruct his beloved son (*fili carissime*) 'quo pacto morem animi tui componas'.<sup>93</sup> The aim of living well and improving one's soul is revisited in other prefatory passages elsewhere in the *Disticha*. In a versified introduction to the second book, 'Cato' refers the reader interested in other subjects like horticulture and history to various canonical Roman authors such as Virgil, Aemilius Macer, Lucan and Ovid. 'Sin autem cura tibi haec est, ut sapiens vivas', the preface goes on, 'ergo ades' in order to learn wisdom (*sapientia*) by reading (*legendo*).<sup>94</sup> Shorter prefatory passages occur at the beginnings of the third and fourth books, which also highlight

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<sup>90</sup> This is made clear in the standard edition of the text, which enjoyed an exceptionally complex manuscript dissemination, evincing many different versions of the text: *Disticha Catonis*, ed. Boas and Botschuyver. An accessible text with translation can be found in *Minor Latin Poets*, ed. Duff and Duff, pp. 596–629. The text was also translated into a large number of other European vernaculars besides Old Norse, including Old English (Cox, 'Old English *Dicts of Cato*'; and Treharne, 'Form and Function'), as well as many others: Brunner, 'On Some of the Vernacular Translations'.

<sup>91</sup> The epistle is alluded to in the Old Norse when the poet describes his material as what a heathen man taught *sínum syni* ('his son'). However, despite the best efforts of many scholars, it remains difficult to determine exactly what form of the text was used: it was probably some form of the 'vulgate' tradition of the *Disticha* as defined by Boas and Botschuyver (*Disticha Catonis*, pp. xlv–ix; cf. *Epistola Catonis*, ed. Boas), though the nature of the translation obscures the exact original form of the Latin. See below, and Alexander, 'Studien über die *Hugsvinnsmál*', pp. 97–111; Ruggerini, 'Il *Parvus Cato*'; and Bauer, 'Die Adaption'.

<sup>92</sup> Hazelgrove, 'Chaucer and Cato', p. 358; and Boas, 'Woher stammt der Name Dionysius Cato?'

<sup>93</sup> 'By what means you should arrange the conduct of your soul'. *Disticha Catonis*, praef. (ed. Boas and Botschuyver, p. 4).

<sup>94</sup> 'But if rather your concern is how to live wisely ... then here you are'. *Disticha Catonis* ii.praef 7–8 (ed. Boas and Botschuyver, p. 90).

the specifically written authority of the *Disticha*: the last in particular enjoins his son to remember *haec praecepta* which are *semper releganda*.<sup>95</sup>

*Hugsvinnsmál* goes somewhat further than both its Latin exemplar and traditional eddic wisdom poems in taking pains to spell out its didactic purpose for the immediate audiences and to indicate how they should relate the frame narrative to the scene of their own learning. The connection is implied in the opening *epistula* of the Latin text with the use of the verb *legere*: an injunction repeated several times over the course of the work, and which indicates the origins of the advice as a written entity in the first instance. This contrasts with the oral, and therefore occasional, scenes of instruction common to the eddic wisdom poems. The *Hugsvinnsmál*-poet recasts the Latin in terms that bring it into line with these conventions. The audience *heyri* what the wise man taught his son, and the medium of this scene of exchange is not specified.<sup>96</sup> The poem is then said to be *fyrir höldum kveðin*.<sup>97</sup> By imagining the scene of instruction in oral terms, the poet assumes an important role as the conduit for the transmission of this valuable wisdom.

This may be one reason that the poem omits a further injunction in the Latin preface, that ‘*legere enim et non intellegere neglegere est*’.<sup>98</sup> If it were not for the reference to reading, this gnome would be very much at home in Old Norse. The difference between rote learning and true comprehension and mastery of knowledge is expressed and exemplified in a variety of other Old Norse wisdom poems, including *Alvíssmál* (which is discussed at a later point in this chapter) and most notably in the conclusion to *Hávamál*, which distinguishes between those who *qveð*, *kann*, *nam* and *hlýddo*.<sup>99</sup> In excluding this part of the text altogether, the poet of *Hugsvinnsmál* may have been concerned to avoid subverting the authority of the speaking voice, which he aligns with his own. In the last stanza, the poet takes the unusual step of calling attention to his role as the moderator of the wisdom of his source for the audience: ‘*kenda ek rekkum ráð*’ and ‘*hyggins manns lýsta ek hugspeki*’.<sup>100</sup> Eddic poetry

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<sup>95</sup> ‘These commands’; and ‘constantly to be re-read’. *Disticha Catonis* iv.praef 4 (ed. Boas and Botschuyver, p. 190).

<sup>96</sup> ‘Should listen’. *Hsv* v.1 l.1 (ed. and transl. Wills and Würth, p. 361).

<sup>97</sup> ‘Recited before people’. *Hsv* v. 149 l.2 (ed. and transl. Wills and Würth, p. 448).

<sup>98</sup> ‘To read and not to understand is to disregard’. *Disticha Catonis* praef (ed. Boas and Botschuyver, p. 4; and transl. Wills and Würth, p. 362).

<sup>99</sup> ‘Recited’; ‘know’; ‘learnt’; and ‘listened’. *Hávam* v. 164 ll. 5–8 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 44; and transl. Larrington, p.38).

<sup>100</sup> ‘I taught men advice’; and ‘I illuminated the foresight of a wise man’. *Hsv* v. 149 ll. 3–5 (ed. and transl. Wills and Würth, p. 448).

prefers to maintain the internal cohesion of the reality it presents by eschewing explicit references to the present; in so doing it allows a suspension of disbelief. It does not follow, however, that the role of the poet or reciter need have been a thankless one.<sup>101</sup> While *Hugsvinnsmál* may not be original in the same sense, the poet makes the case for his own comparable importance. The power of the translator is considerable, as one who both makes learning in other tongues available and guides the less qualified in their interpretation of it. Thus the poet expresses his pride in his work and asserts unequivocally its beneficial effects.

Perhaps it is this sense of his responsibility as translator which compels the Old Norse adapter of *Hugsvinnsmál* to acknowledge awareness of the pagan origin of the material that he is transmitting. Yet he nonetheless affirms its continued relevance without recourse to an extended justification, as for instance in Snorri's *Prologue*. His own remarks are confined to the first stanza of his translation. Here he departs from the original in order to declare the value of the advice the poem contains despite its pagan origins.

Heyri seggir, þeir er vilja at sið lifa  
ok góð verk gera,  
horsklig ráð, þau er heiðinn maðr  
kendi sínum syni.<sup>102</sup>

This material is not just *nýt* and *þorfr*,<sup>103</sup> like the magical knowledge of *Hávamál*, but spiritually beneficial for Christians seeking to behave in the way prescribed by their religion.<sup>104</sup> While the Latin is explicitly aimed at those who might 'in via morum errare',<sup>105</sup> the emphasis is on winning positive recognition rather than personal improvement: as 'Cato' told his son in the prefatory letter of the *Disticha*, 'succurrendum opinioni eorum et consulendum famae existimavi, maxime ut gloriose viverent et honorem contigerent'.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> See Lönnroth, 'Hjálmar's Death-Song' and 'Double Scene'.

<sup>102</sup> 'Men who want to live with good conduct and do good works should listen to the wise advice that a heathen man taught his son'. *Hsv* v. 1 (ed. and transl. Wills and Würth, p. 361).

<sup>103</sup> 'Useful'; and 'handy'. *Háv* v. 163 ll. 8–9 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 44; and transl. Larrington, p. 37).

<sup>104</sup> The word *siðr* is used to translate the Latin *mores* which has the usual sense of 'customs'. While the translation is not inaccurate, it perhaps suggests stronger ethical and religious connotations than are present in the original.

<sup>105</sup> 'Err in the pursuit of morals'. *Disticha Catonis* praef. (ed. Boas and Botschuyver, p. 4).

<sup>106</sup> 'I thought I should come to the aid of their understanding and take their reputation into account, so that they might live with greatest glory and obtain honour'. *Disticha Catonis* praef. (ed. Boas and Botschuyver, p. 4).

*Hugsvinnsmál* perhaps goes even further than both the text it translates and native wisdom poetry like *Hávamál* in promising to offer moral instruction for Christian living as well as common sense advice.<sup>107</sup> Carolyne Larrington notes that God is directly referenced in stanzas 19, 39, 69 and 138, but not at all in the Latin original.<sup>108</sup> The poet also emphasizes the Christian elements already present. Stanza 3 translates the first three *sententiae*, which begin the text by stressing personal obligation towards others, and then in the fourth towards one's property. In his translation, the *Hugsvinnsmál*-poet maintains God's primacy and emphasizes it further by devoting an entire half stanza to man's relationship with God. Where the Latin simply has *deo supplica*, he advises

þarflátr ok þakklátr skaltu fyrir þínum guði  
ok vammalauss vera.<sup>109</sup>

The second half of the stanza then contains an admonition to love one's parents and *þína alla ætt*.<sup>110</sup> In this way the Old Norse suggests a two-fold scheme of duty towards God on the one hand and man on the other.

Whether viewed negatively as damning evidence of his capacities as a translator or positively as a sign of his ability to manipulate his source, the poet's use of the *ljóðahátt* form clearly does alter the meaning of the *Disticha Catonis* at a number of important points. It necessitates some reorganization of the advice to suit the metre and draws out connections in a way that the non-stanzaic, continuous form of the original does not. In stanza 13, for example, the poet puts together several more or less contiguous *sententiae* from the Latin that relate to proper conduct in social interaction. In his arrangement two *sententiae* – *aequum iudica* and *iracundiam rege*<sup>111</sup> – become subordinated to another, *maledictus ne esto*.<sup>112</sup> In the Norse rendition, the latter is given the weight of the long line and the syntax of the whole half-stanza indicates that the first two lines depend on it.

Ráðhollr ok réttðæmr ok í reiði stiltr,

<sup>107</sup> The closest *Hávsm* comes to morally based advice as such is the 'Loddfáfnismál' section.

<sup>108</sup> Larrington, *Store of Common Sense*, p. 110. On the Christian elements of the poem and their heritage see also Alexander, 'Studien über die *Hugsvinnsmál*', pp. 119–20.

<sup>109</sup> 'You must be humble and thankful and unblemished before your God'. *Hsv* v.3 ll. 1–3 (ed. and transl. Wills and Würth, p. 362).

<sup>110</sup> 'All your family'. *Hsv* v. 3 l. 6 (ed. and transl. Wills and Würth, p. 362).

<sup>111</sup> 'Judge fairly'; and 'control your anger'.

<sup>112</sup> 'Do not be abusive'.

Mæltu eigi við ýta ilt.<sup>113</sup>

Following the advice of the first two lines will, it is implied, help in observance of the third. The second half of the stanza, which advocates personal virtue and the cultivation of good men as friends, further suggests the benefits that someone who masters the advice of the first half might reap. In this way, the poet draws the *sententiae* together in a way that brings out causal relationships absent or only hinted at in the Latin original, and he arguably creates a work of greater coherence. Carolyne Larrington has observed that ‘the exigencies of the form impose an ordering and clarity upon the content, an ordering which is particularly valuable for non-narrative material where no beginning, middle, or end is provided by chronology’.<sup>114</sup>

*Hugsvinnsmál* varies substantially in how closely it renders the Latin original. The majority of the poem, beginning with stanza 17, translates the dicta proper. The translations can be quite free, preserving sense over expression, although some are very close to the Latin original, even at the level of the wording.<sup>115</sup> Yet even as the poet follows his exemplar with care, the influence of native wisdom poetry also shows through in the style. Although he follows the Latin in casting his dicta in the imperative singular, he manifests a tendency towards the type of impersonal constructions favoured in Old Norse wisdom poetry. Thus stanza 46 shifts its subject from *þú* to *maðr* in the second half of the stanza.

Einskis biðja samir þér annan þess,  
er gengr af rétttri rífi;  
ósvinnr maðr biðr þess iðugliga,  
er hann þarf hvergi at hafa.<sup>116</sup>

In stanzas 3–16, which translate the *breves sententiae*, a single stanza of *ljóðahátt* may correspond to anything from one to six commands from the original Latin. In most cases, one stanza roughly translates to about three or four *sententiae*,<sup>117</sup> but both

<sup>113</sup> ‘Loyal in advice and just in judgement and moderate in anger, do not speak evil to men’. *Hsv* v. 13 ll. 1–3 (ed. and transl. Wills and Würth, p. 368).

<sup>114</sup> Larrington, *Store of Common Sense*, p. 112. She contrasts this with the Old English prose translation.

<sup>115</sup> The style has been described as ‘plain to the point of flatness’ (Evans, ‘*Hugsvinnsmál*’).

<sup>116</sup> ‘It befits you to ask another for nothing which departs from right reason; an unwise man frequently asks for that which he does not need to have’. *Hsv* v. 46 (ed. and transl. Wills and Würth, p. 389).

<sup>117</sup> This is according to Wills and Würth’s interpretation of the relationship between the poem and the original Latin texts. Stanzas 3, 4, 5, 7 and 11 each include three *sententiae* and stanzas 8, 10 and 14 include four.

higher and lower extremes are also represented.<sup>118</sup> Stanza 6 for example, corresponds to a single phrase in the Latin, *saluta libenter*.<sup>119</sup>

Bragna hvern, er þú á brautu finnr,  
kveð þú hann kunnliga;  
ófróðr er sá; er einskis spyrr,  
er finnr at máli mann.<sup>120</sup>

In this way the Old Norse does not so much change the sense of the Latin, but rather its emphasis. Tarrin Wills and Stefanie Würth note that this sentiment is reminiscent of several gnomes in *Hávamál*,<sup>121</sup> and it may well be that its prominence in native wisdom poetry leads the poet to focus on points that would be familiar to his audience.

Familiarity with another motif common in Odinic wisdom poetry in particular may similarly have led the poet to depart from his exemplar in stanza 14. The text, as most recently edited, reads:

Ókunna menn né ölmosur  
skaltu eigi at hlátri hafa,  
þótt fornmannligir fyrðar sé;  
þolinmóðr þú vert, ok bregð eigi af þeim lögum,  
sem sjálfr settir þú.<sup>122</sup>

The inclusion of two additional lines in this stanza represents an uncharacteristic metrical deviation for the poet, who has not been admired by modern readers for his flexibility or virtuosity of composition.<sup>123</sup> Lines four and five are not paralleled in the Latin text and Finnur Jónsson restored regularity by omitting them.<sup>124</sup> The most recent editors also note that the Latin text at this point speaks of a social inferior: he is *minorem* and *miserum*, a man whom the audience should *vincere* but who is not despised. This sense is only reflected in one branch of *Hugsvinnsmál*'s transmission,

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<sup>118</sup> Five and six *sententiae* respectively lie behind stanza 12 and stanzas 9 and 13.

<sup>119</sup> 'Greet willingly'. *Disticha Catonis, breves sententiae* 9 (ed. Boas and Botschuyver, p. 14).

<sup>120</sup> 'Each man whom you meet on the road, greet him intimately; he who does not ask is unwise, if he finds a man to talk to'. *Hsv* v. 6 (ed. and transl. Wills and Würth, p. 364).

<sup>121</sup> They note stanzas 28 and 63 (ed. and transl. Wills and Würth, pp. 377 and 399). The comparison could also be extended to stanza 57 and also to other Germanic vernacular wisdom poems. See especially the opening of the Old English poem *Maxims IA* 1–4b (*Poems of Wisdom and Learning*, ed. Shippey, p. 64).

<sup>122</sup> 'You must not make a laughing stock of unknown men or beggars, even though they are old-fashioned men; be patient and do not break the rules that you yourself made'. *Hsv* v. 14 (ed. and transl. Wills and Würth, p. 369).

<sup>123</sup> See for instance, Larrington, *Store of Common Sense*, p. 104; and Evans, 'Hugsvinnsmál'.

<sup>124</sup> *Skj* IIB, 188.

which uses the adjective *ógöfgann*.<sup>125</sup> Otherwise, this type of man's apparent poverty is echoed in the Old Norse description of him as an *ölmosur*, but his social status is described more ambiguously. He is merely a stranger, an *ókunnr maðr*, and the only counsel given is that he should be treated with patience according to the *lögum*. This reading of the first line in conjunction with his description as *fornmannligir* in lines 4 and 5 recall warnings about judging unknown individuals prematurely based on appearance which occur commonly in *Hávamál* and underlie the motif of Odinic visitation. It recurs in the Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda, specifically in *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál* and *Reginismál* and also comes up in *Baldurs Draumar* and in prose sources influenced by eddic poetry like *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* and *Nornagests þátr*. Thus the translator not only manipulates his material to align it with Christian tradition, but also with native wisdom poetry.

Standing as it does on the cusp of two traditions of wisdom literature, criticism of *Hugsvinnsmál* has naturally focused on explaining the nature of its relationship with *Hávamál*, and to a lesser extent with *Sólarljóð*. The primary purpose of such inquiry has been to establish whether through it *Hávamál* has been directly influenced by the Old Norse branch of literate wisdom of the sort dominant in European Christendom, and thus stands far from what Hans Kuhn described as *unberührt bodenständig*.<sup>126</sup> This view has been advanced most notably by Klaus von See, whose approach to the poem represented an important shift in *Hávamál* scholarship.<sup>127</sup> He drew parallels of diction and content between *Hávamál*, *Hugsvinnsmál* and by extension the *Disticha Catonis*,<sup>128</sup> which could have been communicated to Scandinavia at a relatively early date through contact with Latin Christendom in the British Isles.<sup>129</sup> It has been convincingly demonstrated, however, by David Evans and Carolyne Larrington that the influence is more likely to have gone the other way:<sup>130</sup> that *Hugsvinnsmál* drew on an already long-established local tradition of wisdom literature, of which *Hávamál* is in many ways representative.

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<sup>125</sup> 'Un-noble, commoner'. *Hsv* v. 14 (ed. and transl. Wills and Würth, p. 369, along with commentary).

<sup>126</sup> Kuhn, 'Die Rangordnung', p. 62. See also Jón Helgason, *Norrøn Litteraturhistorie*, p. 30; and Finnur Jónsson, *Oldnorske I*, 230.

<sup>127</sup> See in particular von See, *Edda*, pp. 27–44, and *Gestalt der Hávamál*. He defended his views against detractors in von See, 'Common Sense und *Hávamál*', and 'Duplik'.

<sup>128</sup> Von See, *Edda*, pp. 32–8, and 'Duplik', pp. 144–5.

<sup>129</sup> Von See, *Edda*, pp. 40–1.

<sup>130</sup> See Evans, '*Hugsvinnsmál*', 'More Common Sense about *Hávamál*'; and Larrington, *Store of Common Sense*, pp. 97–119 and more generally, '*Hávamál* and Sources'. See also discussion of *Hávamál* in Chapter IV.

*Hugsvinnsmál*, like *Sólarljóð*, represents a *mélange* of European Christian wisdom and ‘native’ wisdom. Medieval Icelanders did not necessarily see an opposition between them, and even if so the two types of wisdom were not inseparable or mutually exclusive. *Hugsvinnsmál* and *Sólarljóð* are as much a case of Nordic adaptation of Christian wisdom, as of Christian learning subsuming the Nordic heritage. *Hávamál* itself represents the greatest monument to this cultural interplay: in it elements from different ages and contexts are woven together inextricably, if not seamlessly. Its very length may represent one way in which literate models influenced the development of eddic poetics and created a precedent for the translators who rendered lengthy written texts from Latin into eddic metres. The difficulty that modern scholarship has had in reconstructing an *ur-Hávamál* is ultimately testimony to the inclusive and flexible nature of Old Norse wisdom poetry. It was probably invented and reinvented many times over the periods of oral and literary transmission, as is discussed further in Chapter VI.

So too the *Disticha Catonis* owed its longevity to the authority of the tradition from which it derived, even though its actual form could be quite flexible. The vernacular versions of it represent the most extreme examples of this versatility. In translating the text into *ljóðahátttr*, the *Hugsvinnsmál*-poet chose a medium which conveyed the genre to a lay Icelandic audience in a way most consonant with its air of antiquity and authority. A secular poem deserved a secular form, but the poet himself (likely to have been a cleric) suggests throughout that secular wisdom can have spiritual benefits. It is perhaps unsurprising that he is more willing, then, to draw attention to his role in its transmission than the *Hávamál*-poet, who presents wisdom that is ancient and valuable, but as elusive and treacherous as its notorious protagonist Óðinn.

ALVÍSSMÁL AND SVIPDAGSMÁL

Not all neo-eddic compositions looked to co-opt the form for new religious or romantic content. The fictive world of eddic mythological poetry as it was imagined in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was consistent enough to allow for new compositions that could be mapped very neatly onto the mythological realm as envisaged by earlier poets. Although certainly produced comfortably within the

literate period after conversion to Christianity, neo-mythological eddic poems follow the example of their models and present the words of ancient beings as if directly overheard, without reference to the transmitter. It does not follow that the poems are counterfeit, or were ever intended to mislead audiences about their antiquity. What they do demonstrate is that poets were happy to avail themselves of characters and myths that were no longer the subject of active belief, but that they expected this language to be understood by their audiences.

The poet of *Alvíssmál* certainly understood his Old Norse mythology.<sup>131</sup> In a recent article John Lindow has argued that the frame narrative derives from a genuine myth, or mythic pattern, in which Þórr exercises his role as protector of divine females from representatives of competing groups who wish to acquire them.<sup>132</sup> He suggests that the poet had a good understanding of the role of dwarfs, in so far as it can be reconstructed from the surviving myths, as beings of ambiguous loyalties with Odinic as well as giant-like attributes who occasionally engage in destructive behavioural patterns that emulate Þórr. Lindow reads the poem as an inverted traditional wisdom contest, designed to redress the balance between Óðinn and Þórr. It is certainly clear, particularly in the context of the Codex Regius poems, that, as Lindow observes,<sup>133</sup> the frame narrative deliberately invokes the pattern of a wisdom contest in which Óðinn is the expected protagonist. Þórr's presence has thus often been a cause for concern and comment among scholars, who have explained it in various ways. Helge Ljungberg, for instance, cited it as a rare surviving witness to an alternative view of Þórr as wise and cunning.<sup>134</sup>

Paul Acker, on the other hand, has argued that the substitution of Þórr for Óðinn need not be a mistake, as his aim is not actually to measure his wisdom against the dwarf's, and perhaps he even comes out better for being only *meðalsnotr*.<sup>135</sup> The dwarf's ultimate defeat reflects above all his own shortcomings, in particular the myopic nature of his wisdom despite the expanse of his knowledge. Yet Þórr perhaps deserves more credit than Acker allows. His dissembling is similar to Óðinn's in

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<sup>131</sup> Indeed, some interpreters have seen it as a mnemonic or primer for poets: von See *et al.*, *Kommentar* III, 271–2.

<sup>132</sup> Lindow, 'Poetry, Dwarfs, and Gods'. On this negative reciprocity as an underlying structure of Old Norse mythology, see Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes* I.

<sup>133</sup> Lindow, 'Poetry, Dwarfs, and Gods', p. 297.

<sup>134</sup> See especially Ljungberg, *Tor*; and, for more general comments, Moberg, 'Language of *Alvíssmál*', p. 311.

<sup>135</sup> Acker, 'Dwarf-lore in *Alvíssmál*', p. 218. The reference to *Hávnm* is to l. 1 of vv. 54–6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 25).

*Vafþrúðnismál*, as it also capitalizes on his opponent's failure to understand that he is in danger. *Vafþrúðnir* failed to recognize his guest and accepted a challenge he could never win, and *Alvíss* allowed himself be distracted from the present situation by abstract, generalized descriptions. The mode of *Þórr*'s triumph is, however, in proportion to the danger posed by his opponent and the value of his wisdom.

In his role as extractor of valuable wisdom, *Óðinn*'s source is always a dangerous hostile force connected with giants, the dead or both (as discussed in Chapter IV).<sup>136</sup> *Alvíss* has hints of both about him, as *Þórr*'s first impressions of him indicate:

Hvat er þat fira, hví ertu svá fõlr um nasar,  
vartu í nótt með ná?  
þursa líki þicci mér á þér vera,  
ertattu til brúðar borinn.<sup>137</sup>

*Alvíss* confirms that he is in fact a dwarf ('bý ec fyr iorð neðan, á ec undir steini stað'),<sup>138</sup> and his absurd pretensions in the exchange that follows demonstrate that he does not understand the dangerous position he has placed himself in. This explains *Þórr*'s sudden change of tack when the dwarf insults and provokes him. He calls him a *vísi gestr*, mockingly acknowledging his mistaken belief that, like *Óðinn*, his wisdom will allow him to enter a hostile hall and take something precious.<sup>139</sup> *Alvíss* is no sapientious giant and *Þórr* is confident enough in the limitations of the ironically named dwarf's wisdom to initiate a trial. The dwarf accepts straight away and in so doing condemns himself as surely as *Vafþrúðnir* does.

What *Þórr* gains from the encounter is proportionate to the risk he faces. His willingness to settle matters with his physical superiority even at the cost of breaking sacred social codes is well enough attested – it is used to draw an end to the embarrassing revelations of *Lokasenna*, for instance – but he has no need to revert to it here. It is evident from the start of the poem that *Þórr* will come out on top and the suspense comes, as it does in *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*, in waiting for him to

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<sup>136</sup> The final possibility refers to the 'Rúnatal' portion of *Hávnm*. On how the patterns vary, see Quinn, 'Dialogue with a *Völvu*'. On the association with giants, see also Laur, 'Die Heldensage', pp. 126–9.

<sup>137</sup> 'What sort of man is that, why so pale about the nostrils, did you spend the night with a corpse? The image of an ogre you seem to be to me, you are not meant for a bride'. *Alv* v. 2 (ed. Necke I, 124; and transl. Larrington, p. 109).

<sup>138</sup> 'I live below the earth; my home is under a rock'. *Alv* v. 3 ll. 2–3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 124; and transl. Larrington, p. 109).

<sup>139</sup> 'Wise wanderer'. *Alv* v. 8 l. 3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 125; and transl. Larrington, p. 110). Cf. von See *et al.*, *Kommentar* III, 320.

realize it. His horror, like Geirroðr's, is left to the audience to envision as the last gloating words of the poem are given to Þórr. What he, and indeed the poem's audience, gets out of the encounter is a list of poetic synonyms presented in an entertaining and memorable way. Thirteen sets of these are supplied by Alvíss in response to his opponent's questions, focusing on synonyms or poetic circumlocutions for a given topic in the languages of different creatures:<sup>140</sup> men, Æsir, Vanir, giants, dwarfs and elves. Most scholarship on the poem has centred on this material,<sup>141</sup> which presents many symbolic features in its selection and number of topics,<sup>142</sup> and which has prompted a wide-ranging search for parallels.<sup>143</sup> The names which are supplied in different languages often alliterate with the givers of the names, in a pattern dictated by the relatively fixed order of beings and their consequent place in a *ljóðahátt* stanza:<sup>144</sup> thus the 'giants' (*iotnar*) call 'calm' (*logn*) 'the great lee' (*ofhlý*) while the vanir call it 'wind-end' (*vindslot*) and the dwarfs (*dvergar*) 'essence of day' (*dags vero*).<sup>145</sup> Herein lies a clue to the value that eddic wisdom poetry would have had for training poets, to which *Alvíssmál* offers its own contribution modestly. Hugo Gering and Barent Sijmons even went so far as to describe the poem as 'ein versifiziertes Kapitel aus der skaldischen Poetik'.<sup>146</sup> The wisdom is of an order that even Þórr can extract, and its possessor would do well, unlike the dwarf Alvíss, not to overestimate the significance of mastering it.

The comedic elements of the poem have thus long been recognized, even as critics have varied in how seriously they took its mythological content. Heinz Klingenburg summed *Alvíssmál* up well as a *Zwergenkommik*,<sup>147</sup> and Lennart Moberg observed that the poet 'does not leave the impression that he had any particularly serious intention in composing his verses'.<sup>148</sup> The tone itself does not necessarily

<sup>140</sup> Moberg, 'Language of *Alvíssmál*', pp. 301–10; and Güntert, *Von der Sprache*, pp. 135–9 for discussion of synonyms and circumlocutions, and how they differ among various races.

<sup>141</sup> E.g., Güntert, *Von der Sprache*; Moberg, 'Language of *Alvíssmál*'; and Klingenburg, '*Alvíssmál*', esp. pp. 125–36.

<sup>142</sup> On the division of these topics and their possible evidence for earlier arrangement of the poem, see de Vries, 'Om Eddaens Visdomsdigtning', p. 9. On the mystical aspects of the selection see Güntert, *Von der Sprache*, pp. 155–6; and Klingenburg, '*Alvíssmál*', pp. 122–4.

<sup>143</sup> See especially Watkins, 'Language of Gods'.

<sup>144</sup> Güntert, *Von der Sprache*, pp. 137–53; Klingenburg, '*Alvíssmál*', esp. pp. 128–31; and Moberg, 'Language of *Alvíssmál*', pp. 311–13.

<sup>145</sup> *Alv* vv. 21–2 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I,127; and transl. Larrington, p. 112). On the orthography and interpretation of stanza 22, see Salberger, 'Vinzflot'; and von See *et al.*, *Kommentar* III, 347–51.

<sup>146</sup> Gering and Sijmons, *Lieder der Edda* I, 112.

<sup>147</sup> Klingenburg, '*Alvíssmál*', p. 116.

<sup>148</sup> Moberg, 'Language of *Alvíssmál*', p. 323.

mark *Alvíssmál* out as an interpolation: the mythological poems of the Codex Regius shift comfortably and frequently between grave and light-hearted portrayals of their subjects. In the mythological framing of didactic material too, the poet was in the good company of several other eddic poems. His understanding and deployment of mythological structures was sophisticated and required an audience both familiar with them and not overly reverent in their attitude towards them. If it was aimed at poets whose education in traditional poetics had followed anything like the scheme laid out in *Snorra Edda*, his cleverness certainly would have been appreciated.

This audience may be contrasted, perhaps, with that of *Svipdagsmál*. Preserved only in late paper manuscripts of the Poetic Edda,<sup>149</sup> *Grógaldr* and *Fiðlvinnsmál* are in many ways more ‘schizophrenic’ compositions than *Alvíssmál*.<sup>150</sup> Peter Robinson describes ‘a self-conscious literary artifice about *Svipdagsmál*’ that marks it out as ‘a deliberate pagan pastiche’ in which mythology is invoked for colour rather than substance.<sup>151</sup> Whether the poem is based on a genuine myth or mythological poem, or, more probably, merely seeks to imbue a fairytale with the significance of myth,<sup>152</sup> the form of the poem was consciously chosen for its mythological associations. The very breadth of influence from older poetry ‘stamps [it] as inauthentic’.<sup>153</sup> Again, it does not follow that the poet had any notion of creating something authentic. The way he combines elements and motifs from various eddic genres bespeaks either a limited understanding of the tradition he was attempting to emulate or, perhaps more likely, a free attitude in its adaptation. The narrative frame of *Grógaldr* most clearly resembles those of poems like *Völuspá*, *Hyndluljóð*, *Baldurs draumar* and to a lesser extent *Hervararkviða*. The protagonist consults a dead woman, but a friendly one, who provides him with *galdrar* rather than a prophetic vision. He selects the dialogue form of wisdom poetry, casting his narrative as a series of verbal encounters but borrows features from narrative eddic

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<sup>149</sup> For the fullest discussion of the poem and its preservation, see Robinson, ‘Edition of *Svipdagsmál*’. On the general background of the poem see Motz, ‘*Svipdagsmál*’; and on its late and problematic preservation see Gering and Sijmons, *Lieder der Edda* I, xiii–xv.

<sup>150</sup> For Lindow’s characterization of the poem, see ‘Poetry, Dwarfs, and Gods’, p. 285.

<sup>151</sup> Robinson, ‘Edition of *Svipdagsmál*’, pp. 396–406. He argues from this that the first half of the thirteenth century is the most likely period in which an antiquarian poet might have had the extensive knowledge of earlier eddic material as well as mastery of the form that the *Svipdagsmál*-poet displays.

<sup>152</sup> This question has been a central concern for scholarship on the poem: see de Vries, *Altnordisches Literaturgeschichte* II, 215–17; Sturtevant, ‘Old Norse Proper Name’; Motz, ‘King and the Goddess’; and Schröder, ‘*Svipdagsmál*’. Robinson (‘Edition of *Svipdagsmál*’) sees the narrative as completely borrowed from a Celtic story (pp. 229–63), with parallels to eddic motifs being either incidental or direct borrowing of specific details (pp. 299–325).

<sup>153</sup> Hollander, ‘Lay of *Svipdag*’, pp. 163–4.

verse as well when it suits him. *Fiölvinnsmál* begins with third person narration<sup>154</sup> – unusual but not unheard of in eddic wisdom poetry<sup>155</sup> – and shifts between speakers within a single stanza in several instances.<sup>156</sup> The poem invokes the wisdom tradition in other particulars. The list of spells, for instance, is paralleled by the ‘Ljóðatal’ portion of *Hávamál* and extraction of valuable information from a hostile source through questions and answers is very common.<sup>157</sup> The generic eddic affiliations of the poem are therefore far from straightforward. The poet made free use of traditional motifs and conventions in order to construct a unique composition that aligns fairytale with myth. The inclusion of mythological detail and allusion contributes to the poem’s creation of an ambiguous otherworldly setting in which the magical happenings of the narrative are at home. To the *Svipdagsmál*-poet’s mind, translating a narrative into traditional eddic terms served to elevate it into the company of poems he so clearly admired.

#### CONCLUSION

Eddic compositions owe their survival and aspects of their literary form to thirteenth-century redactors who not only preserved them but developed a symbiotic relationship for them with the wider European literary background.<sup>158</sup> The poems examined in this chapter bear witness to another manifestation of the taste which developed for eddic verse in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This allowed eddic poetry to be adapted to new genres and ideas through fresh composition. Wisdom poetry, conglomerate by its very nature and apparently admired by pagans and Christians alike, provided useful models for these new vernacular compositions. The poems discussed here all convey wisdom of an unusual source from the point of view of

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<sup>154</sup> *Fiölvinnsmál* (*Svip*) v. 1 ll. 1–3 (‘Edition of *Svipdagsmál*’, ed. Robinson, p. 67).

<sup>155</sup> The most notable exception is *Vafþr* v. 5 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 45; and transl. Larrington, p. 40). For further discussion see Chapter IV above.

<sup>156</sup> *Fiölvinnsmál* (*Svip*) vv. 3 and 6 and v. 1 (‘Edition of *Svipdagsmál*’, ed. Robinson, pp. 67–9) combines third person narration and direct speech. Robinson (‘Edition of *Svipdagsmál*’, pp. 101–5) comments on the difficulties this form creates for identifying which character is meant to speak which lines in the first two stanzas of the poem.

<sup>157</sup> Along with the prophecy poems, these include *Vafþr* and *Alv* as well as portions of *Reg* (vv. 1–4) and *Fáfn* (vv. 1–22).

<sup>158</sup> See also Chapters II and VI.

Christian Europe, including a vision from beyond the grave in *Sólarljóð*, the advice of a Roman pagan in *Hugsvinnsmál* and pre-Christian mythology in *Alvíssmál*.

The complex narrative frames of native wisdom poetry provided a versatile framework for conveying such complexities. These poems' use of them provides evidence for an evolving understanding of eddic verse, the associations which clung to it, and the situations and contexts for which it was most appropriate. Consolatory truisms for the spurned lover; pseudo-classical knowledge linked with a venerable Latin school-text; mystical visions; and mythological mnemonics: all of these could be linked in to the established features of eddic wisdom verse. Eddic metre and imagery presented an attractive model for conveying mystical and ancient – one might even say liminal – knowledge within a firmly Christian context. Legendary material dealing with the heroes and supernatural entities of Nordic antiquity had endowed eddic verse with its particular character, but the two were not inseparable. All of the poems treated here differ from the mainstream of eddic tradition, though the framing of their content had clear echoes of earlier eddic texts, and teach us much about what stuck out to thirteenth- and fourteenth-century readers. An oral milieu was, for example, crucial, even when the source was a Latin text which saw much of its authority stemming from its written form. Dialogues were consequently still used, and hints of Odinic themes and scenes can be traced in a number of otherwise Christian poems. It is, however, possible to press these similarities too far, or indeed to exaggerate the popularity of eddic verse-forms for fresh compositions well into the Christian period in Iceland. Rather than a real resurgence of eddic verse, these divergent developments reflect the probably occasional and small scale on which eddic composition persisted into the literate Christian period.

## VI

# Conclusion

The Old Testament book of Sirach opened with the statement that ‘all wisdom cometh from the Lord, and is with him forever’.<sup>1</sup> It went on to add that ‘to fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: and it was created with the faithful in the womb’.<sup>2</sup> Readers in medieval Iceland must, from the eleventh century, have known this text and the concatenation of Christian heritage, belief and culture from which it stemmed.<sup>3</sup> Eddic wisdom poetry fitted into this view of wisdom only in part. It emphatically did not come from a single authority figure, much less from fear of the Judeo-Christian God. But the last part of Sirach I.14 – that wisdom was created in the womb – shares much common ground with the view of the dozen or so eddic wisdom poems. For their composers, wisdom was an attribute of all sentient beings, human and supernatural alike, which grew exponentially with life and experience. All creatures learned from each other. In practice, however, the spirit of wisdom acquisition was more often competitive and confrontational rather than collaborative. Proper application of knowledge could make one great, and so those possessing any amount of wisdom should guard and deploy it only with care.

In closing this analysis of how the transmission of knowledge was staged in eddic poetry, I aim to bring together strands of the previous chapters and seek to answer fundamental questions of what defined eddic wisdom as a genre in Old Norse. I survey the situations in which wisdom revelation could arise, as well as the content which such texts avoided, and what these features might indicate about the uses and value of eddic wisdom. Closely bound to this is the question of the origins of different portions of eddic verse: the interaction of oral and literary traditions, and the emergence of key recurring themes – above all the presence of Óðinn – which provide some basis for a wisdom genre beyond the aims of the Codex Regius compiler. An important part of this is a brief re-examination of how eddic treatment of wisdom and related matters compares with that of other traditions, especially skaldic verse. The goal is, in other words, to see what makes eddic wisdom poetry what it is. The end

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<sup>1</sup> Sir. I.1 (*Biblia sacra*, ed. Weber, p. 1028; *King James Version*, ed. Carroll and Prickett, p. 113).

<sup>2</sup> Sir. I.14/16 (*Biblia sacra*, ed. Weber, p. 1029; *King James Version*, ed. Carroll and Prickett, p. 113).

<sup>3</sup> On Christian instruction in Iceland see Hansen, ‘Icelandic *Lucidarius*’; and Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, ‘Prose of Christian Instruction’.

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result is a relatively clear view of the characteristics of the genre, at the heart of which is a questionable and competitive attitude to knowledge and authority shared by men, gods and others.

### THE USES OF WISDOM IN EDDIC VERSE

On a general level the eddic wisdom poems share a focus on interpersonal interaction, but it may not follow that they evolved as a single genre. Wisdom existed alongside and could be woven into particular cycles or stories. Within the Codex Regius and the later prose narrative cycles based on the Sigurðr poems, his instruction has a function within a larger narrative. Yet *Reginismál*, *Fáfnimál* and *Sigrdrífumál* are remarkable for their lack of interest in the action of the story. Indeed within this immediate context the narrative as such is clearly secondary, providing a context for dialogue which makes up the bulk of the poems. These poems draw on the common knowledge of a story that was clearly widely disseminated over medieval northern Europe to construct the narrative frames for their wisdom dialogues.<sup>4</sup> Yet as I have argued in Chapters II and IV, these operate in very much the same way as other wisdom poems. The Codex Regius compiler's organization might therefore reflect newer uses to which these poems were being and would be put; that is, constructing lengthy narrative cycles based on literary models, rather than the context of the individual poems' initial genesis. At heart *Sigrdrífumál* is advice for mankind, not Sigurðr in particular, though the dragon-slayer is certainly held to be an outstanding representative of his race. In this way he is not dissimilar to Geirroðr, Agnarr and Níðuðr. These human characters belong to a legendary world as far removed from the realities of medieval Scandinavia as Ásgarðr itself. Like the mythological characters of the wisdom poems, they are not omniscient, and their fates are sealed. Whatever Sigurðr learns at the valkyrie's feet or Óðinn learns at the giant's court, or even whatever he may advise others, their fates are fixed: Sigurðr will die at the Giukings' hands and Óðinn in Fenrir's jaws. Furthering a narrative was simply not what these poems set out to do.

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<sup>4</sup> On the possible history and dissemination of the legend, see Andersson, *Legend of Brynhild* pp. 15–23.

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### *The re-use of wisdom*

How useful the substance of wisdom revelations ever was to the medieval audiences of these poems is more difficult to ascertain. The late *Alvíssmál* seems to be one of the most straightforward cases. It contains a list of synonyms that would be handy for any Old Norse poet (though may also of course have fulfilled other purposes). The mythological facts of *Grímnismál* and *Vafþrúðnismál* could have a similar use, but also go far beyond it, and allow eddic poets and their audiences to create a mental landscape of the mythological realm.<sup>5</sup> A fundamental function of all wisdom poetry is to describe the world we live in so it can be better negotiated and mastered. This extends from the seen to the unseen, from the workings of God in Christian wisdom literature, to the realm of the gods in Old Norse. Special knowledge of the supernatural in the period of active pagan belief would be desirable for far more than poets interested in traditional diction. The eddic poems repeatedly suggest that the power of kings is at the mercy of Óðinn's whim, and any interaction with that god is always fraught with danger. As I argued in Chapter II, the advice and observations on social behaviour contained in the wisdom poems apply equally to the real audience of the poems. A relatively rigid view of the individual's role within strict social expectations engendered normative statements of life and experience as found in traditional wisdom.<sup>6</sup> The narrative frames provide a context for interpretation of this wisdom as well as performance. Thus to some extent the poems can function effectively, and even in a similar way, whether the gods are viewed as real supernatural entities or as archetypal euhemeristic representations of humanity.

This is not to say that centuries of cultural change did not leave an indelible mark on these poems. More speculatively we may wonder how much the original context of performance of these poems might resemble their use in the textual tradition of the thirteenth century. Among other features, the quantity of direct speech in eddic poetry, and particularly in the mythological poems, bears witness to its ultimately oral origins. Studies by Bertha Philpotts and more recently Terry Gunnell have stressed the likely dramatic aspect of their performance as well as the nature of their composition.<sup>7</sup> This context of performance – which above all must have dictated

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<sup>5</sup> Larrington, 'Cosmic History, Cosmic Geography'.

<sup>6</sup> Bagge, *Society and Politics*, pp. 174–90.

<sup>7</sup> Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*; and Philpotts, *Elder Edda*.

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their form and purpose – is hopelessly lost, as they exist in manuscript form only. One possible exception is what would appear to be stage directions in the margins of the Codex Regius.<sup>8</sup> This may indicate that the poem was still intended for performance and at the very least demonstrates a consciousness that the words of the text themselves are not sufficient to recreate its effect. At best, we can speculate based on the internal evidence of individual poems about what this originally might have been.<sup>9</sup> *Grímnismál*, for instance, has the advantage that the frame narrative of the poem pertains obviously to a momentous occasion in human society: the accession of a new ruler. The potential ritual significance of such a scene (if not the actual particulars of its form) is easy enough to imagine.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the poems of Sigurðr's youth can be related to milestones of male human life. More mysterious are poems such as *Vafþrúðnismál* in which human beings do not feature in the frame narrative, and are of hardly any interest in the wisdom content proper. Whatever the occasion of their initial recitation, in every case we need not look far for wisdom that may be of more generalized interest.

The poems which have survived must have been adapted to new occasions, potentially many times, as by the time they were written down the original social settings of their recitation would probably have been forgotten and obsolete. The very presence of *Grímnismál* in Iceland, where kings were never a feature of native society before the mid-thirteenth century, bears obvious witness to this. The transfer of power, of course, was a concern close enough to home. After 1262/4, and the influx of European literature in the High Middle Ages that came with Norwegian rule, interest in the nature of kingly powers and prerogatives may have had a natural resurgence. *Grímnismál*'s view of kingship and the qualities needed for it, however, was a long way from the ideals of late medieval Christian Europe.<sup>11</sup>

There is evidence of reworking in the poems as we have them preserved. *Hávamál* and *Grímnismál* especially are the product of active reinterpretation. In Chapter IV I argued that the prose frame to *Grímnismál* is a later addition, which affects the interpretation of the poetic material it frames. The current form of *Hávamál* above all has proven difficult to explain. While it has not resulted in any

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<sup>8</sup> For illustration and discussion, see Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*, pp. 206–12.

<sup>9</sup> For a recent study of the possible relationships between the eddic poems, myths and actual rituals, see Schjødt, *Initiation between Two Worlds*.

<sup>10</sup> Fleck, 'Knowledge Criterion' and '*Konr – Óttarr – Geirroðr*'. For a different view of 'special knowledge' see Bucholz, 'Shamanism'.

<sup>11</sup> See in general Stacey, 'Nobles and Knights'; and Bagge, 'Scandinavian Kingdoms'.

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absolutely firm conclusions, the scholarship on *Hávamál* has crystalized some of the fundamental difficulties in analysing eddic poetry as we meet it in the manuscripts. Elements of the text seem to hark back to the oldest poetry. The famous verses 76 and 77 are echoed in *Hákonarmál* and potentially also in *The Wanderer*.<sup>12</sup> The allusive mythological content of ‘Rúnatal’ in particular also seems to suggest antiquity, and yet even this has been taken as evidence of Christian influence, with Óðinn’s self-sacrifice likened to that of Christ. Above all it is the poem’s obviously composite nature which demonstrates that its creation was a multi-stage process and that these changes appear to have been effected at both an oral and a literate stage. The nature of such poems invited addition and manipulation, and individual gnomes may well have enjoyed an independent existence (as further discussed at a later point in this chapter). The question, then, is whether it is the association of wisdom with Óðinn as a speaker that connected them in the mind of the *Hávamál*-poet (or one of the poets or compilers) or whether the narrative frame was a secondary imposition, perhaps modelled on poems like *Grímnismál* and *Vafþrúðnismál*. In Chapter IV I argued that while these strands are discernible it is ultimately impossible to isolate them and that the poem does function effectively as a coherent whole. Yet in the same chapter I also discussed how we might get some insight into the poem’s component parts through narratological analysis: by clarifying the speaker and addressee in the various sections of the poem, it may be possible to determine what is going on in those individual sections, and there are discernible remnants of narrative frames reminiscent of those of the other wisdom poems. This poem (and others) imposed a certain view of how wisdom should be conveyed, which suggests an ongoing appreciation of its content and a certain view of the manner in which it should be presented. In other words, it shows the emergence of a wisdom genre within eddic poetry.

### THE LIMITS OF THE EDDIC WISDOM GENRE

The key result of work on the literary history of eddic verse, wisdom included, is a view of the poles of the tradition. One can discern fairly clearly the form and context

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<sup>12</sup> For the context of such North Sea exchanges, see Dance, ‘North Sea Currents’.

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in which the poems emerge in the thirteenth century. One can also make an educated guess at the conditions which lie behind its genesis as oral poetry. However, the process which brought the two together and led to the development of various forms and generic features is more mysterious.

There is good reason, then, to remain sceptical that the Codex Regius compiler's understanding of eddic genre reflects the way that the poems were always used and thought of. We are also to some extent justified in coining our own generic descriptions (with the caveats laid down in Chapter II) that privilege similarities in apparent function and form over the associative criteria of the Codex Regius compiler. At the end of the day his is an artificial scholarly imposition almost as much as ours is. Any kind of practical criticism of the poems makes it very clear that hard and fast generic divisions are few or non-existent. In an oral society in particular it is probably more realistic to talk about a series of overlapping conventions and modes that were available for a poet to draw on (as discussed at a later point in this chapter). The state in a transitionally literate society need not have been very different. The motif of Óðinn's obsessive quest for knowledge, for example, while most characteristic of wisdom poetry, also occurs in the narrative frames of the prophecy poems *Völuspá* and *Baldrs draumar*. Yet formally these poems are fundamentally different, in that they express narrative rather than wisdom. Similarly the *sennur* of the Helgi poems follow conventions for verbal contests of this type but are put to rather different use than the mythological *sennur*: they have a role to play within a narrative and are subordinated to it.<sup>13</sup> Shifting between modes within a poem appears to be permitted and could be used to create very sophisticated effects.<sup>14</sup> The Helgi poems and the poems of Sigurðr's instruction in particular demonstrate how readily material could be reworked and brought together in new ways, at both an oral and written stage of transmission.

With these limitations in mind when we look at the so-called wisdom poems, they can be seen to represent as coherent a genre as any. None of the conventions associated with wisdom poetry is necessarily unique to it, but these features are combined often enough that they do indicate something of the audience's expectations. The revelation of new wisdom, for instance, always requires an extraordinary event: an encounter with the otherworldly. The wisdom must always be

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<sup>13</sup> For a full discussion of *sennur* and *mannjafnaðr* as a genre, see above, Chapter II.

<sup>14</sup> See Quinn, 'Verseform and Voice'.

## VI: Conclusion

expressed as the direct speech of particular individuals. It may be inherent to the value of the information that the narrator does not claim it as his own. Equally, there must be a specified audience different to that of the poem. As long as these conditions are fulfilled, in many ways it does not matter whether the poem takes the form of a monologue or a dialogue. The content of the wisdom may be names; observations on the natural world and the mythological realms and their inhabitants; precepts for social behaviour; and numinous knowledge. An individual poem may include some or all of the above in any combination.

The most common elements of the narrative frames of wisdom poems are the presence of Óðinn and some sort of agonistic exchange or contest. Even poems which do not use them may draw on these features for effect. Thus I argued in Chapter V that the substitution of Þórr for Óðinn and of a dwarf for a giant lies at the heart of the dramatic irony in the poem *Alvíssmál*. Judy Quinn has explored the effects of the substitution of the valkyrie as the hero's teacher in *Sigrdrífumál*.<sup>15</sup> This creates a unique dynamic in Old Norse wisdom poetry outside of the explicitly Christian compositions: a scene of benevolent instruction.

Perhaps there is good reason that this dynamic is generally avoided in traditional compositions. The possibility of danger and the unstable nature of the speaking authority provide not only a commentary on the wisdom but also dramatic tension and a sense of narrative progression, in the absence of actual narrative. It further begs questions about the original context of composition and performance of these poems. Inextricable from the question of eddic sub-genres – including wisdom poetry – is their ultimate origin as oral poetry. The evolution of eddic sub-genres as we have them must have begun in the oral period. Old Norse is unique among the early Germanic languages both for the stanzaic nature of its traditional alliterative verse, and for its division into multiple metres.<sup>16</sup> These metres encoded a complex web of associations that poets could draw on. This contrasts with the development of Old English and, in so far as it is possible to draw conclusions from a limited body of surviving material, other West Germanic metres. This Scandinavian taste for metrical complexity led to the development of the notoriously intricate skaldic measures.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Pers. comm.* J. Quinn.

<sup>16</sup> It is possible that there may be some traces of an alternative, or at least a more flexible, metrical system associated with some genres or some modes of Old English verse, but this is difficult to confirm. See especially Bliss, *Metre of Beowulf*, pp. 88–97, and 'Origin and Structure'.

<sup>17</sup> See Gade, *Structure of Old Norse Dróttkvætt*.

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Whether or not these were conceived under the influence of other more learned poetic traditions, skaldic composition flourished in Scandinavia for a significant period before the advent of written culture.

### *Oral and literate features of eddic wisdom poetry*

Essential as enquiry into the uses and origins of eddic verse is for understanding the poems as they have come down to us, it is dogged by one simple problem: that the poems perforce survive outside an oral context, in one or more fixed manuscript forms. The manner and duration of their earlier existence is hence ultimately unknowable.<sup>18</sup> Extensive study of oral culture, beginning in earnest in the first half of the twentieth century, highlighted a number of features seen as characteristic of oral composition – above all repetition of stock sections and phrases.<sup>19</sup> The pursuit of these characteristics, and consequently of possible survivals of oral composition, extended to include eddic verse as well as Old English and other pieces of medieval literature.<sup>20</sup> Eddic poetry does indeed contain a proportion of formulaic phrasing, as well as formulaic scenes and settings.<sup>21</sup> One common feature of oral poetry to which eddic verse generally conforms is the reluctance to set forth an immanent whole; more commonly a single episode is picked out, on the assumption that an implied audience already knows the background needed to contextualize the content.<sup>22</sup> Episodes picked out for treatment in verse tended towards the reflective and the dramatic, serving to examine and exemplify the reactions of individuals involved, often given in their own

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<sup>18</sup> For the rather unusual proposal that arrangements of beads may have served a pseudo-textual mnemonic function in third-century Denmark, see Fernstål, ‘Spoken Words’.

<sup>19</sup> Acker, *Revising Oral Theory*, esp. pp. 61–110. The formative study is Lord, *Singer of Tales*, esp. pp. 99–123. Important further explorations of the topic in a broader setting include Ong, *Oral Literature*; Lord, ‘Characteristics of Orality’; and Foley, ‘“Reading” Homer’.

<sup>20</sup> An overview is Foley, *Oral-Formulaic Theory*. Selected specific applications include Bäuml, ‘Unmaking of the Hero’ on German literature; and Ford, ‘Performance and Literacy in Medieval Welsh Poetry’. There is a wide range of studies on the oral character of Old English poetry, strongly influenced by Magoun, ‘Oral-Formulaic Character’. Subsequent important (and often critical) contributions include O’Brien O’Keeffe, *Visible Song*; Niles, ‘Understanding *Beowulf*’; and Foley, ‘Texts that Speak to Readers’.

<sup>21</sup> For figures, see Mellor, *Analyzing Ten Poems*, p. 153. A selection of formulas is identified in Pàroli, *Sull’elemento formulare nella poesia germanica*. General discussion, with analysis of specific examples, can be found in Harris, ‘Eddic Poetry as Oral Poetry’; and Kellogg, ‘Prehistory of Eddic Poetry’. For orality in other Old Norse texts, see Gísli Sigurðsson, ‘Orality and Literacy’.

<sup>22</sup> Lord, *Singer of Tales*, pp. 217–20; and Foley, *Immanent Art*, esp. pp. 39–60. This is also true of sagas (Clunies Ross, *Old Norse Icelandic Saga*, pp. 43–4; and Clover, ‘Long Prose Form’) and skaldic poetry (Lindow, ‘Narrative and the Nature of Skaldic Poetry’).

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words. Eddic poetry therefore, like other oral verse traditions, also lays a strong emphasis on speech, either in the form of monologue or dialogue. These characteristics must on some level hark back to the period of oral composition and circulation; indeed, poets in earlier and contemporary England clung to an idealized oral setting for their compositions even when it had become an anachronism.<sup>23</sup> Taking up this same point, recent critical studies have stressed the complexity of the interface between orality and literacy.<sup>24</sup> The barrier between these was far from impermeable, and could result in a dynamic period of ‘transitional literacy’ during which written texts existed as auxiliaries to ongoing oral circulation. Forms of individual surviving compositions could, as a consequence, vary substantially. More importantly, elements of ‘oral’ style could become fossilized as part of an emergent written poetic tradition: the presence of some oral features does not necessarily presuppose poems which existed as oral entities in anything like the same form.<sup>25</sup> Formulaic phrasing, for example, is arguably not prevalent enough in eddic poems to support identification of oral material as traditionally defined, and may have been present for artistic rather than improvisational reasons.<sup>26</sup> Eddic verse fits very well into a transitional context such as this, which may have gone on for generations, even if by the time surviving sources were produced it had moved further in the direction of a written than an oral tradition;<sup>27</sup> indeed it may even have passed through a phase of longer ‘epic’ cycles of which surviving poems are only reminiscences.<sup>28</sup>

The heroic poems have undoubtedly been the better studied in this context. They are more obviously comparable with ‘epics’ from other cultures and traditions, including classical Greek and Latin material, more closely related Germanic examples such as *Beowulf*, *Waltharius* and the *Nibelungenlied* and most recently Slavic verse.<sup>29</sup> In discussions of eddic poetry specifically, the question of orality is often as closely bound up with dating as with the appreciation and function of the poetry itself. Much

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<sup>23</sup> Niles, ‘Myth of the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet’; Frank, ‘Search for the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet’ (on the modern idealization of ‘bards’ and minstrelsy in Anglo-Saxon England); and Kabir, ‘Forging an Oral Style?’ for a later Middle English example.

<sup>24</sup> Kellogg, ‘Prehistory of Eddic Poetry’, pp. 192–6. The theory of transitional literacy is developed extensively in O’Brien O’Keeffe, *Visible Song*. See also Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*; Clunies Ross, *Old Norse Icelandic Saga*, p. 44; and Mellor, *Analyzing Ten Poems*, p. 67.

<sup>25</sup> Acker, *Revising Oral Theory*, pp. 92–3.

<sup>26</sup> Mellor, *Analyzing Ten Poems*, p. 21; Lönnroth, ‘Hjálmar’s Death Song’; and Acker, *Revising Oral Theory*, pp. 86 and 96.

<sup>27</sup> Clunies Ross, *Old Norse Icelandic Saga*, p. 47; and Acker, *Revising Oral Theory*, p. 93.

<sup>28</sup> Kellogg, ‘Prehistory of Eddic Poetry’, pp. 195–8.

<sup>29</sup> See above, p. 22. Slavic and other comparative material has been most thoroughly explored by John Miles Foley (e.g., ‘Orality, Textuality, and Interpretation’, “‘Reading’ Homer”).

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of the work has been concerned with the identification of formulas rather than with systematic analysis of how eddic composition and transmission worked in practice. Lars Lönnroth has offered the most explicit model for the latter and his concept of the double scene provides a very convincing context for the delivery of eddic poetry.<sup>30</sup> His assumption that dialogue poems require extended narratives, originally in verse and later in prose, is more problematic.<sup>31</sup> The model of *Beowulf*, which provides an excellent parallel to the preponderance of dialogue in the narrative heroic poems, may not apply as well to the wisdom dialogues.<sup>32</sup> The presence of narrative frames, which Lönnroth takes as evidence that they too represented episodes within a larger narrative context, are often quite self-contained and secondary to the actual content of the poems.

### *Narration and prose*

Other attempts to interpret the non-narrative mythological poems – and most surviving eddic compositions are non-narrative<sup>33</sup> – have focused on the absence of third-person narration.<sup>34</sup> Changes of speaker within a stanza are rare and this has been taken to suggest that a different model for performance might apply. Terry Gunnell has argued that the dialogues must have been fully-fledged dramatic performances with multiple participants rather than the declamation or improvisation of a single poetic voice.<sup>35</sup> While much about this theory is appealing, and it does address some of the special characteristics of this poetry, there are certain grounds for caution. The practical difference between dialogues and monologues, as discussed in Chapters II and IV, is not as great as it may initially appear. Also, while rare, narrative intervention by a third-person narrator is not unheard of. The most notable example of

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<sup>30</sup> Lönnroth, 'Double Scene', 'Den dubbla scenen' and 'Hjálmar's Death Song'; and cf. Shippey, 'Speech and the Unspoken', pp. 192–3.

<sup>31</sup> Lönnroth, 'Hjálmar's Death Song', p. 8.

<sup>32</sup> For discussion and references see Orchard, *Critical Companion*, pp. 203–37.

<sup>33</sup> Heinz Klingenberg ('Types', p. 136) notes that this 'enumerative' type developed as the dominant form of eddic mythological poetry.

<sup>34</sup> E.g., Tulinius, *Matter of the North*, pp. 57–8.

<sup>35</sup> This is based in large part on a slightly tenuous argument that these poems would have involved insuperable difficulties for performance by a single person (Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*, pp. 236–81 and 'Performance Demands of *Skírnismál*').

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this is the fifth stanza of *Vafþrúðnismál*, which states the scene-change implicit in the dialogue explicitly in verse.

Fór þá Óðinn, at freista orðspeki  
þess ins alsvinna iqtuns;  
at hǫllo hann kom, oc átti Íms faðir:  
inn gecc Yggr þegar.<sup>36</sup>

All of this information is confirmed in the direct speech of the following stanza. Most often this function is accomplished through prose. However, as in *Vafþrúðnismál*, the narrative intervention is normally all but redundant. Thus a very similar scene-change is signaled in *Lokasenna* by prose: ‘Síðan gekk Loki inn í hǫllina. Enn er þeir sá, er fyrir vóru, hverr inn var kominn, þognoðo þeir allir’.<sup>37</sup> In the verse that follows, Loki identifies himself, declares that ‘þyrstr ec kom þessar hallar til’ and demands to know ‘hví þegit ér svá’.<sup>38</sup> The function of the prose interruptions within *Lokasenna* are purely summary and arguably only serve to disrupt the dialogue. Whoever was responsible for the prose introduction and conclusion to the poem wanted to read it as a full mythological narrative in its own right with specific and dire consequences.<sup>39</sup> The poem itself provides no basis for this, nor is the episode credited with any such significance elsewhere. In this context it is tempting to read stanza 5 of *Vafþrúðnismál* as an aberration or interpolation, as Gunnell has strongly advocated,<sup>40</sup> but this would set a dangerous precedent. It may be safer to conclude that narrative intervention was permitted in dialogue poetry, but by and large avoided.

There are, conversely, instances of the prose frame and prose interventions into dialogue being more essential to the structure of a poem.<sup>41</sup> In the riddle contest of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, which as I argue in Chapter IV above is otherwise structured much like an Odinic wisdom contest, the answers to the riddles all occur in prose: if there ever was a poetic response to Gestumblindi’s riddles, it has been completely excised by the saga author. Solutions to the riddles of Gestumblindi might

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<sup>36</sup> ‘Then Óðinn went to try the wisdom of the all-wise giant; to the hall he came which Im’s father owned; Óðinn went inside’. *Vafþr v. 5 (Edda, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 45; and transl. Larrington, p. 40)*.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Afterwards Loki went into the hall. And when those inside saw who had come in, they all fell silent’. *Lok prose after v. 5 (Edda, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 97; and transl. Larrington, p. 85)*.

<sup>38</sup> ‘Thirsty I, come to these halls’; and ‘why are you so silent’. *Lok v. 6 ll. 1–2 v. 7 l. 1 (Edda, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 97–8; and transl. Larrington, p. 86)*.

<sup>39</sup> Klingenberg’s reading of the poem supports this impression of the event’s significance for the greater mythological narrative, though he argues for ‘the triumph of the conceptual over the epic element’ (‘Types’, pp. 142–153).

<sup>40</sup> Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*, p. 277.

<sup>41</sup> A point also recently recognized in Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North*, pp. 222–3.

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have only ever been available as a prose adjunct to the verse. One might even question whether the saga author knew the intended solutions to any or all of the riddles.<sup>42</sup> The position of Anglo-Saxon riddles in Old English and Latin, which comprise the most obvious comparanda, was more complex.<sup>43</sup> No direct connection can be evinced between the Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon traditions, and there were many other variants of riddles used in medieval literature, though these serve to illustrate how earlier medieval authors of similar riddling material presented possible or intended solutions in different ways.<sup>44</sup> Mainstream Latin *enigmata* of the eighth and ninth centuries were composed with the answer as their title, and the two often (though not always) circulated together. The Anglo-Saxon author of *Solomon and Saturn II* presented a duel of learning in which both riddles and solutions were put forth in verse.<sup>45</sup> The riddles of the Old English Exeter Book collection, on the other hand, are not accompanied by any answers (save for those which incorporate runes), and thus, when written in their surviving form, the solution was presumably only available orally, if at all. Indeed, some readers even supplied their own thoughts on possible answers in marginal scratchings.<sup>46</sup>

Prose intervention is essential within the Helgi poems and the poems of Sigurðr's instruction for linking together very short dialogue exchanges. It could be taken as evidence that these poems as they are preserved are cobbled together from other compositions, as to an extent they certainly are. But there is no reason to suppose that this type of redeployment of material was not a perfectly acceptable compositional mode in its own right. With wisdom material in particular, originality is more likely to have undermined than commended the authority of a text. To some extent this is probably true of all eddic poetry as the exceptional self-referential comment the poet of *Hymisqviða* makes clear:

Enn ér heyrtr hafið — hverr kann um þat

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<sup>42</sup> We might for instance be sceptical of such answers as 'hest dauðan á ískjaka ok orm dauðan á hestinum' ('a dead horse on an icefloe and a dead snake on the horse'). *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (ed. Tolkien, p. 42). The occurrences of a number of variant answers to this in different manuscripts reinforces the impression that the solutions to some riddles had become divorced from them at some point in their transmission, or simply become obscure: J. Love (*pers. comm.*).

<sup>43</sup> See especially Orchard, 'Enigma Variations', pp. 285–94.

<sup>44</sup> For broader discussion see Tupper, 'Comparative Study of Riddles'; Taylor, *Literary Riddle before 1600*; and Whitman, 'Medieval Riddling'. Old Norse context is provided in Heusler, 'Die altnordischen Rätsel'; Reifegerste, 'Die altnordischen Rätsel'; Davidson, 'Insults and Riddles'; and Bødker, Alver and Holbek, *Nordic Riddle*.

<sup>45</sup> Anlezark, *Solomon and Saturn*, esp. pp. 15–21 (which stresses links with both Old English riddles and wisdom poems, and Latin *enigmata*).

<sup>46</sup> See, for examples, riddles 5–7 and 36 (*Exeter Book*, ed. Krapp and Dobbie, pp. 183–5 and 198).

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goðmálugra gørr at scilia —.<sup>47</sup>

The avoidance of narrative intervention in eddic monologues and dialogues may therefore better be accounted for by other considerations besides performative context.

### WISDOM BEYOND THE EDDA, AND SITUATIONAL AUTHORITY BEYOND WISDOM

Despite the manifold hurdles thrown up by these considerations of uses, origins and interaction between prose and verse, it remains possible to sink some generic foundations for eddic wisdom poetry. Above all, one should not take the arrangement of the principal surviving source – the Codex Regius – for granted. It is not, of course, to be dismissed out of hand; but rather it must be put in context alongside characteristics shared by the poems themselves and drawn from comparative material in related traditions. Eddic wisdom poems tended to be partially but not wholly formulaic, informed and shaped by, if not always wholly a product of, oral composition. They shared a very situational quality, taking an occasion of dialogue as an opportunity for recitation of traditional learning. Fundamental to this was an avoidance of extended narrative, and naturally a keen focus on speaker(s) in a real or assumed exchange. It is ultimately their didactic function that separates the wisdom poems from closely related and in some ways even overlapping genres such as prophecy and verbal contests.

Scope certainly exists for the definition of genres within eddic poetry, and even perhaps within eddic wisdom poetry. But wisdom as circulated in Old Norse literature was not inherently bound just to this sub-set of texts. Old Norse literature of every type is littered with proverbial utterances, down to brief runic inscriptions going back to the Viking Age.<sup>48</sup> These have, in anthropological studies, often been found to carry links with the words of ancestors as part of a speech-based tradition predicated

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<sup>47</sup> ‘But you have heard this already, anyone wiser about the gods may tell it more clearly’. *Hsq* v. 38 ll. 1–4 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 98; and transl. Larrington, p. 86).

<sup>48</sup> For a brief overview of the Germanic wisdom tradition see Poole, ‘Wissendichtung’. For runic inscriptions see Cavill, *Maxims in Old English Poetry*, pp. 34–5; and Knirk, ‘Runes from Trondheim’, pp. 417–19 (on the likelihood of proverbs circulating before and independently of texts which include them).

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on personification.<sup>49</sup> Proverbial wisdom has an important role to play in the extended narratives of the sagas, being offered at appropriate moments by both characters and the voice of the narrator.<sup>50</sup> Similar usage can be found in analogous pieces of other medieval literature, especially Old English; the use of proverbs in *Beowulf* especially has been extensively explored.<sup>51</sup> In such settings gnomic utterances serve both to contextualize individual experience within the larger sphere of human experience, and also to offer a seemingly objective interpretation or judgement of events.<sup>52</sup> Structurally, in both the Poetic Edda and *Beowulf*, they could be used to bridge sentences or ideas, and were used to appeal in various instances to common social wisdom, ancient lore and supernatural revelation, including both Christian and secular or pagan elements.<sup>53</sup>

The nature of the authority behind wisdom is explored in the poetic collections that bring examples of it together, which in the Old Norse context belong almost universally to the eddic mode. Such an association seems to have been natural to poets in medieval Iceland. Eddic verse served as a vehicle for collections of proverbial wisdom with such force that it could be transferred also to the wisdom that came from Christian mysticism and Latin didactic texts. The temptation to accept this union of wisdom and eddic verse without question must be resisted; similarly, situational authority based on notionally oral pronouncements was by no means restricted to wisdom poetry. Some of the features which probably commended eddic verse for the conveyance of wisdom have been laid out above, but it is equally worth briefly reversing the question to ask what made the other principal form of Old Norse poetry – skaldic verse – less suitable, and to consider other poems and verse-forms which provide alternative perspectives on the role of the poet and the words he purveys.

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<sup>49</sup> Firth, 'Proverbs in Native Life', pp. 260–3; and Penfield and Duru, 'Proverbs: Metaphors that Teach', esp. pp. 119–20.

<sup>50</sup> Meulengracht Sørensen, *Saga and Society*, pp. 78–9; Deskis, *Beowulf and the Medieval Proverb Tradition*, pp. 82–4; Whiting, 'Origin of the Proverb', pp. 54–5 (on *Grettis saga*); and Cavill, *Maxims in Old English Poetry*, pp. 29–34 (especially on *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*).

<sup>51</sup> Karkov and Farrell, 'Gnomic Passages in *Beowulf*'; Henry, *Early English and Celtic Lyric*, pp. 91–132; and Deskis, *Beowulf and the Medieval Proverb Tradition*.

<sup>52</sup> Andrew, *Postscript to Beowulf*, pp. 92–4; and Karkov and Farrell, 'Gnomic Passages in *Beowulf*', pp. 303–7.

<sup>53</sup> McCreesh, 'How Pagan are the Icelandic Family Sagas?', p. 59; and Cavill, *Maxims in Old English Poetry*, pp. 132–55.

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### *Wisdom and skaldic verse*

Wisdom, even in its most general sense, is very rarely the subject of skaldic verse. *Málsháttakvæði* provides the most notable exception. It represents a unique and innovative composition that mimics and parodies a number of genres, native and foreign. The generic associations of the main skaldic verse types are undoubtedly part of the reason this is so. *Dróttkvætt* is largely confined to manifestly courtly verse and praise poetry by named poets in particular.<sup>54</sup> In such a context, the didactic mode of wisdom verse may have been inappropriate. For a poet to speak, or lend his name to, a verse presuming to condescend to his patron, however kindly meant, must have required some daring.<sup>55</sup> The subjects of most skaldic poetry exist firmly in the world of historical reality, no matter how fantastic the language it may employ. Such particularized situations are not occasions for philosophising on greater truths, which may distract from the import of the moment.

While this is true of the majority of courtly praise poetry and other occasional verses, in the case of memorial poetry in particular the situation becomes more complex. Poems on the subject of deceased men exhibit an extraordinary variety of both eddic and skaldic poetic forms. Joseph Harris has explained this by characterising the *erfíkvæði* as ‘a functional genre embedded in the legal-religious events connected with death and burial’ and argued that as such it should not be viewed as a single unified genre, but an overlapping repertoire of themes and motifs in which there was considerable room for the poet to express his grief and anxiety.<sup>56</sup> These poems thus make an extremely useful test case for exploring the generic associations of eddic and skaldic poetry, as has recently been done by Bernt Øyvind Thorvaldsen.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> On the personal aspect of skaldic (as opposed to eddic) poets and reciters see Clover, ‘Skaldic Sensibility’, esp. pp. 68–81; Meulengracht Sørensen, *Saga and Society*, p. 87; and Faulkes, *What Was Viking Poetry For?*, pp. 8–14. The picture we have of skaldic genres is undoubtedly somewhat skewed due to the nature of its preservation in prose texts of particular genres.

<sup>55</sup> Though it did occasionally happen: Sigvatr Þórðarson’s *Bergsglisvísur* is the most interesting example. Erin Goeres (‘King is Dead’ pp. 241–5) observes that the poet presents frankness as a consequence of loyalty and his presumption could be accounted for in part by his relationship with his new patron’s father, who he is beholden to even after his death. She argues that the poem represents an evolution in the poet’s role and voice at court.

<sup>56</sup> Harris, ‘*Erfíkvæði* – Myth, Ritual, Elegy’. Elsewhere, Harris has noted similarities with the heroic elegies in eddic poetry as well (‘Origin of Elegy’, p. 90) and postulated a model for their development in which experienced events expressed in monologue were framed and eventually subsumed by narrative-dramatic frames (‘Elegy in Old English and Old Norse’, pp. 48–50).

<sup>57</sup> Thorvaldsen, ‘Generic Aspect of the Eddic Style’.

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Where the subject of the poem is the dead, the supernatural must feature more obviously in the foreground and eulogy and lament were naturally united in memorial odes.<sup>58</sup> The *erfíkvæði* may be seen as public, courtly compositions as well as expressions of personal grief like Egill's celebrated *Sonatorrek*.<sup>59</sup> Examples of the former, such as Arnórr jarlaskáld's *Haraldsdrápa*,<sup>60</sup> concentrate primarily on the deeds that marked the life of the celebrated protagonist(s) and the loss of those left behind. In this there is a purpose shared with praise poetry: to elevate the heir whose lineage is celebrated and to ensure that his patronage is inherited. Furthermore, as Roberta Frank has observed, 'the departed was still powerful and their good will – and that of their descendant – had to be secured'.<sup>61</sup>

### *Eddic memorial poems*

The relationship between the earthly setting of a poem's recitation and the mythological realm is less explicit in the eddic memorial lays. Only *Haraldskvæði* (or *Hrafnsmál*), a tenth-century composition in honour of Haraldr hárfagri attributed to Þorbjörn hornklofi, contains self-referential language and a direct address to the poet's audience. As the poem is reconstructed, two introductory stanzas preface the dialogue between a raven and a valkyrie that makes up the remainder of the poem. He asks that ringbearers should listen while he tells *frá Harald*i using the *möllum* which he heard a valkyrie speak to a raven.<sup>62</sup> As in many eddic poems, the dialogue takes the format of questions and answers. The format is somewhat perfunctory, however. It provides an apt context for the discussion of Haraldr as a king and in particular as a warrior, but there is not much more to the two speakers than their traditional associations and the poet is quick to emphasize his active role as the witness recounting the conversation. It has been proposed that the raven is to be identified with the poet himself, as his nickname appears elsewhere as a raven-heiti.<sup>63</sup> Indeed one of the few kennings in the poem, occurring at the end of the second stanza

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<sup>58</sup> Frank, 'Eulogies'.

<sup>59</sup> *Skj* BI, 34–37.

<sup>60</sup> Ed. Whaley.

<sup>61</sup> Frank, 'Eulogies', p. 121.

<sup>62</sup> 'About Harald'; and 'words'. *Harkv* v. 1 ll. 1, 2 and 5 (*Skj* BI, 22).

<sup>63</sup> Orchard, *Dictionary*, p. 357.

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is *hymis hausrofa*:<sup>64</sup> the skull-breacher of Hymir (a giant), and thus of the sky, is a bird. After the raven gives his account of the battle, the valkyrie's interest turns from Haraldr's prowess in war to his generosity at court – including his patronage of skalds alongside his proper treatment of other categories of men. Though presented in the form of a mythological revelation, the poem is unwaveringly earthbound in its focus. Usurping an eddic voice, the skald demonstrates that his own is just as capable of elevating his subject.

The remaining two memorial poems in eddic metre are far more conventional in their use of the eddic mode. They are set in the mythological realm, relating the arrival of their subjects into Valhøll, and describe their interaction with supernatural beings without reference to the poet or the scene of his recitation.<sup>65</sup> *Eiríksmál*, dating from the mid-tenth century and composed in memory of Eiríkr blóðøx is an anonymous composition. The poet goes out of his way, in typical eddic fashion, to ensure that no voice from outside of the scene he has constructed need be heard: both the action of the poem and the identity of its speakers are expressed within their dialogue with each other. It is not only anonymous, but cast completely as the speech of mythological and heroic characters and, eventually, King Eiríkr. Indeed, the dialogue is the structuring principle of the poem, as it is in many eddic poems. Aside from subject matter, which fundamentally links the poem to the historical present and by analogy to other memorial poems, *Eiríksmál* reads in many ways like a typical eddic poem. There is a striking amount of metrical variation, but it is difficult to draw any conclusions from it given the extremely short length of the poem. As it is preserved in *Fagrskinna*, it consists of only nine stanzas.<sup>66</sup>

This is also true of *Hákonarmál*, attributed to Eyvindr Finnsson skáldaspillir, which (like *Eiríksmál*) dates to the tenth century, and commemorates King Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri (934–61).<sup>67</sup> It is suggested in *Fagrskinna* that Eyvindr modeled his poem on *Eiríksmál*,<sup>68</sup> and there are certainly strong parallels between the two: it also alternates between *ljóðaháttir* and *fornyrðislag* and makes heavy use of dialogue, though it is embedded in narrative. Here the rationale for variation is more plain, as

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<sup>64</sup> *Harkv* v. 2 l. 7 (*Skj* BI, 22).

<sup>65</sup> On their presentation of Valhøll see Marold, 'Das Walhallbild den *Eiríksmál* und *Hákonarmál*'. Further discussion of the relationship between the poems can be found in von See, 'Zwei eddische Preislieder: *Eiríksmál* und *Hákonarmál*'.

<sup>66</sup> *Skj* BI, 164–6.

<sup>67</sup> The poem is preserved in *Heim* and also (in part) in *Fagrskinna*: *Skj* BI, 57–60.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*; cf. *Heim* (ed. Bjarni Einarsson I, 86).

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the switch to *ljóðaháttur* accompanies the shift into dialogue and a mythological setting. At the end, the poet moves away from describing the elevation of Hákon back to earth to reflect, in the final three stanzas, on the significance of the loss for those who are left behind. He declares in stanza 21, very much in the conventions of *erfíkvæði*, that no better king will be born before the end of the world. The final stanza of the poem even begins with two lines well known from *Hávamál*: ‘Deyr fé, deyia frændr’,<sup>69</sup> but concludes the half stanza with ‘eyðisk land ok láð’,<sup>70</sup> whereas *Hávamál* reads ‘deyr siálfr it sama’.<sup>71</sup> With the change in the long line Eyvindr signals his change in perspective. Whereas the gnome in *Hávamál* is concerned with self-preservation and achieving immortality in fame, *Hákonarmál* looks at the effect of the individual’s death on society. Accordingly, it follows with a half-stanza commenting on their state:

síz Hókon  
fór með heiðin goð,  
morg es þjóð of þéuð.<sup>72</sup>

The poem also avoids exulting, as *Hávamál* does, in what the famous dead have achieved:

Enn orðztírr, at aldri deyr:  
hveim er sér góðan getr.<sup>73</sup>

These two poems focus on how deeds in this life lead directly into glory in the next and a place in the mythological realm alongside supernatural hosts. The authority of the poet here lies, as it does in eddic wisdom poetry, in his assumed role as reporter of a scene which it is not within the power of the audience to witness.

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<sup>69</sup> ‘Cattle die, kinsmen die’. *Hávam* vv. 76 and 77 ll. 1–2 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 29; and transl. Larrington, p. 24).

<sup>70</sup> ‘Lands and territories come to naught’. *Hákm* v. 21 l. 3 (*Skj* BI, 60).

<sup>71</sup> ‘The self must also die’. *Hávam* vv. 76 and 77 l. 3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 29; and transl. Larrington, p. 24).

<sup>72</sup> ‘...Since Hákon went among the heathen gods, many a nation has been enslaved’. Eyvindr Finsson skáldaspillir, *Hákm* v. 21 ll. 4–6 (*Skj* BI, 60).

<sup>73</sup> ‘But glory never dies, for the man who is able to achieve it’. *Hávam* v. 76 ll. 4–6 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 29; and transl. Larrington, p. 24).

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### *Myth and narrative in Þórsdrápa*

There are a few cases in which skaldic poems do relate actual myths. Skaldic verse dealing primarily with mythological subjects belongs within the specific context of shield poetry. Unlike eddic mythological poetry, however, these poems surely cannot have served as a medium for conveying a mythic narrative to an audience unfamiliar with it.<sup>74</sup> The reasons are perhaps best illustrated by one of the apparent exceptions: the skaldic poem *Þórsdrápa*, and its associated preface. This poem tells a story, but not particularly clearly.<sup>75</sup> What it presents is more like a series of images or moments. These stylized highlights can be contrasted with the two eddic stanzas relating to the same myth. Snorri quotes them from an unnamed poem within the prose narrative summary of the story he gives in preface to *Þórsdrápa*.<sup>76</sup> The inclusion of these stanzas in some manuscripts suggests that it was his knowledge of an eddic rather than skaldic poem that formed the basis of Snorri's prose narrative. In the eddic stanzas Þórr's experience with the giantesses is related in simple and clear terms.<sup>77</sup> It has been suggested that *Þórsdrápa* might have been composed to liken Earl Hákon to the divine hero as part of a metaphor for his own struggles.<sup>78</sup> If such a parallel was intended, and it might very well be, it was never explicitly expressed. As in eddic poetry, where the mythological realm is the primary subject the realities of the historical present are not allowed to intrude.

The eddic verses Snorri quotes are the direct speech of Þórr, and it would seem (from Snorri's work at least) that the gods spoke in eddic verse. It is understandable that Eilífr Goðrúnarson did not allow the voices of his characters to be heard in *Þórsdrápa*, lest they should drown out his own. Within the portion of the poem which Snorri quotes, the skald himself is relatively inconspicuous, referenced in just a single aside: 'þyl ek granstrauma Grímnis'.<sup>79</sup> The eddic poet, in contrast, best asserts his authority through invisibility. Representing wisdom collections as the

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<sup>74</sup> *Þdr* has been called the most difficult of all skaldic compositions (Frank, 'Hand Tools', p. 94; and Clunies Ross, 'Interpretation of the Myth', p. 370).

<sup>75</sup> The existence of a separate eddic poem on the subject suggests it was a popular myth: Clunies Ross, 'Interpretation of the Myth', p. 371. Recent discussion of the religious tensions in the poem can be found in Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North*, pp. 149–57.

<sup>76</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 18 (ed. Faulkes I, 24–5; and transl. Faulkes, pp. 81–2).

<sup>77</sup> For the text, see *Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 317–8.

<sup>78</sup> Frank, 'Hand Tools', p. 102.

<sup>79</sup> 'I recite Grímnir's [Óðinn's] lip-streams [mead of poetry]'. Snorri Sturluson, *Skm*, ch. 18 (v. 74 l. 19) (ed. Faulkes, p. 26; and transl. Faulkes, p. 83). Russell Poole, 'Þulir as Tradition-Bearers', p. 243 draws attention to the mythological connotations of the uncommon verb *þylja* for the poem.

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direct speech of supernatural and legendary beings would have given them associations of antiquity, if not unproblematic authority. The unreliable character of Óðinn in particular is emphasized and even celebrated in wisdom poetry. The information he has is limited and gained through personal encounters and his motivation for sharing any of it stems from individual interest. The dialogue form of the wisdom poems conveys the unavoidable subjectivity of human knowledge acquisition and transmission. In a Christian literary context there must have existed an implicit contrast between this and the omniscience of God and the disinterested testimony of his prophets and saints which could be immutably expressed by quill on parchment.

### THE AUTHORITY AND SUBJECTIVITY OF WISDOM

In the context of eddic wisdom poetry, all knowledge thus ultimately derives from first-hand personal experience. As such it is subjective and fundamentally limited by individual consciousness, and reconsideration of the consequences of this for the authority and value of wisdom forms a suitable conclusion on the setting of wisdom verse.

The possibility of being wise beyond one's personal experience is predicated upon the fact that humans' knowledge is unequal. Age alone is therefore one of the most obvious and significant sources of this inequality. It is the origin of the giant Vafþrúðnir's enviable store of knowledge about the worlds, just as it is King Hrothgar's in *Beowulf*.<sup>80</sup> The inherent irony in this for humans, and maybe for gods and giants as well, is that they are best equipped to negotiate life as they near its end. They are, however, in a position to share what they have learned with others so that they may benefit from an enlarged store of knowledge while they are still in a position to do so.

While old age is the most obvious source of experience, it is not necessarily coterminous with it. A long life gives the potential for a diverse and enriching range of experience, but the volume and nature of that experience depends on individual

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<sup>80</sup> Stanza 43 is quoted and discussed in Chapters III and IV above. In *Beowulf*, Hrothgar's age, experience and wisdom are frequently stressed, at (for example) 356–7a, 656, 1400b and 1699b (ed. Fulk, Bjork and Niles, pp. 14, 24, 49 and 57).

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circumstances and actions. While both characters in *Vafþrúðnismál* are ancient, therefore, it is the breadth of his experience and his active questing that Óðinn boasts of in preface to his answers to Vafþrúðnir's questions:

Fiqlð ec fór, fiqlð ec freistaðac,  
fiqlð ec reynda regin.<sup>81</sup>

This refrain begins in response to Vafþrúðnir's explanation that his own wisdom derives from his wide travels throughout the cosmos, which extend even into the realm of the dead. Those who have furthest transcended the reaches of common experience are naturally the ones in possession of uncommon wisdom.

The final inequality (which is no less stressed in the wisdom poems) is that individuals are not equally intelligent. It is one thing to have an experience, but another entirely to understand it, and hardest of all to use that understanding as a basis for correctly judging future situations. This is where the giant Vafþrúðnir falls down. He knows better than to contend with Óðinn in wisdom, and yet carelessly lets himself be lured into doing so.

There is, then, from these sources the potential to gain wisdom that transcends one's personal experience. How this can actually be accomplished, though, is deeply problematic. Traditional Old Norse wisdom poetry consistently portrays wisdom instruction as a dangerous, at times unsuccessful and always extraordinary occurrence. Fundamental to this is the nature of an oral milieu, where there is no textual tradition; no impartial book that can be consulted at will and which gives the same answer to every questioner. It is bound up with human interaction and all the complexities that ensue therefrom. Complete disinterest does not exist, and both participants in an exchange must have some motivation for seeking or sharing counsel in the specific and immediate situation. Personal experience can be viewed as a commodity like any other in an interpersonal exchange. The relationship between the speakers defines the choice and deployment of the wisdom. The valkyrie's wisdom in *Sigrdrífumál* is given freely because she has an interest in the success of her lover. Elsewhere wisdom is wielded more crudely as a weapon, and Óðinn's revelations in *Grímnismál*, for example, are a means of conferring patronage. As he strips away Geirroðr's life he gives Agnarr the special knowledge that justifies his elevation to his

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<sup>81</sup> 'Much have I travelled, much have I tried out, much have I tested the Powers'. *Vafþr* vv. 44, 46, 48, 50, 52 and 54 ll. 1–3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 53–5; and transl. Larrington, pp. 47–8).

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father's station. Key here is what the speakers choose to share. Óðinn pronounces on all manner of subjects in *Hávamál*, but at the end boasts that he will keep his most valuable numinous knowledge to himself. The possibility of holding back underlies every wisdom exchange, as participants entreat, badger and manipulate each other into telling them what they want to know. Alvíss, Vafþrúðnir and Fáfñir are called upon in refrains to defend their reputations for wisdom.<sup>82</sup> We are told in the prose of *Sigrdrífumál* that Sigurðr 'biðr hana kenna sér speki'.<sup>83</sup>

A further and still more dangerous possibility must also be taken into account: deliberate deception. Óðinn employs it systematically within the narrative frames of wisdom poems to gain an edge in his encounters. In this context, as he says himself in *Hávamál*, 'hvat scal hans trygðom trúa'?<sup>84</sup> This danger underlies all human interaction because while words are traded, consciousness is not shared. Deception is a preoccupation of the *Sólarljóð*-poet, as discussed above in Chapter V, and men can do each other harm not only by revealing damaging information, but also by holding back information or, more insidiously, through misrepresentation or outright lies. Thus we may question Óðinn's advice in *Hávamál* when it contradicts the way he acts himself. All wisdom is potentially valuable, but its truth cannot be taken for granted (even when it sounds true) and context is often everything.

Beyond the intentions of the person divulging wisdom, there are further possible obstacles to a successful exchange. Relevant experience must be expressed and briefly encapsulated in words. It must be reduced to a fundamental truth that can be related to other situations and conditions. All of this depends on effective communication: the speaker must pass information on clearly and the listener must also hear and, more crucially, grasp the full meaning of everything that is said. In turn, he must also be able to identify correctly those occasions on which the wisdom might be of value. Here again individual intelligence comes into play as much as motivation. Thus *Hávamál* observes:

Ósnotr maðr er með aldir kœmr  
þat er bazt, at hann þegi;

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<sup>82</sup> *Alv* v. 9 ll. 1–3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 125; and transl. Larrington, p. 110); *Vafþr* v. 24 ll. 1–3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 49; and transl. Larrington, p. 43); and *Fáfñ* v. 12 ll. 1–3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 182; and transl. Larrington, p. 159).

<sup>83</sup> 'Asked her to teach him wisdom'. *Sigrdr* prose before v. 5 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 190; and transl. Larrington, pp. 167).

<sup>84</sup> 'How can his word be trusted!'. *Háv* v. 110 l. 3 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 34; transl. Larrington, p. 29).

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engi þat veit, at hann ekki kann,  
nema hann mæli til mart;  
veita maðr, hinn er vætki veit,  
þótt hann mæli til mart.<sup>85</sup>

These mythological scenes of wisdom exchange thus naturally mirror the ways in which human beings exchange their wisdom, especially in an oral culture. The gnomes of *Hávamál* repeatedly return to this theme, and always express it in oral terms. The scene is often a visit to a strange hall. A newcomer in a familiar setting brings with him the possibility of fresh wisdom from a hitherto unknown store of knowledge. This creates the effect of a double scene, as not only does the setting parallel a type of gathering at which poetry might have been performed, but, in relating these dialogues, the poet is also bringing in less familiar characters to the gathering whose experience might have something to teach them. Though poems may have been memorized and re-performed on many occasions, they present themselves as one-off speeches or conversations within specified scenes.

It is worth dwelling on this last point: that the notionally personal, occasional nature of wisdom exchange belied its traditional, normative content. The gnomes, proverbs, mythological tidbits and general truths were anything but individual, and yet constitute the bulk of surviving wisdom poems. What they show is similar to the pattern of sapiential texts from a broad range of other cultures: an encyclopaedic tendency melded to one interpretation of personal authority. In pre-literate societies, an inherited body of learned wisdom provided one means of passing on valued knowledge about all aspects of society, religion and the world at large. Perhaps not surprisingly, a body of knowledge of this kind was a valued resource: so much so that it might often be committed to writing at a relatively early stage. Such a tradition was of course still very flexible in content, and could be added to, but nevertheless derived some of its importance from its real or assumed antiquity, and hence its source. In literate Christian culture one branch of Middle Eastern sapiential literature was enshrined in the Bible, and hence came to enjoy fixed and monumental authority. The wisdom it offered reflected its monotheistic origins: the setting for wisdom remained

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<sup>85</sup> 'The foolish man in company does best if he is silent; no-one will know that he knows nothing, unless he talks too much; but the man who knows nothing does not know when he is talking too much'. *Hávam* v. 27 (*Edda*, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn I, 21; and transl. Larrington, p. 18).

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oral, but focused on the passive acceptance of teaching from an omniscient paternal authority. Old Norse wisdom poems shared some elements of this: the oral setting, and the view that traditional encyclopaedic wisdom derived its potency from this source. It was the nature of this source that differed. Norse wisdom came not from the lap of an all-knowing father but from a rival's winking, double-edged discourse. Individuals learned from – and simultaneously tested and challenged – one another in order to become wise. Wisdom was not omniscience: it was as slippery, deceptive and enticing as the words of men, gods, giants and others competing for success in a harsh and dangerous world.

## ABBREVIATIONS

(All poems are of anonymous composition unless otherwise stated)

<i>Alv</i>	<i>Alvíssmál</i>
<i>Bdr</i>	<i>Balds draumar</i>
<i>Berv</i>	Sigvatr Þórðarson, <i>Bersøglisvísur</i>
<i>Eirkm</i>	<i>Eiriksmál</i>
<i>Fáfn</i>	<i>Fáfnismál</i>
<i>FSk</i>	<i>För Skírnis</i>
<i>Geisl</i>	Einarr Skúlason, <i>Geisli</i>
<i>Grí</i>	<i>Grímnismál</i>
<i>Gríp</i>	<i>Grípispá</i>
<i>Gylf</i>	Snorri Sturluson, <i>Gylfaginning</i>
<i>Gðqf</i>	<i>Guðrúnarqviða in fyrsta</i>
<i>Hardr</i>	Arnórr jarlaskáld, <i>Haraldsdrápa</i>
<i>Harkv</i>	Þorbjörn Hornklofi, <i>Haraldskvæði</i>
<i>Has</i>	Gamli kanóki, <i>Harmsól</i>
<i>Hákm</i>	Eyvindr Finsson skáldaspillir, <i>Hákonarmál</i>
<i>Hátt</i>	Snorri Sturluson, <i>Háttatal</i>
<i>Hávm</i>	<i>Hávamál</i>
<i>Heildr</i>	<i>Heilags anda drápa</i>
<i>Heim</i>	Snorri Sturluson, <i>Heimskringla</i>
<i>Helr</i>	<i>Helreið Brynhildar</i>
<i>Hlg</i>	Þjóðólfr inn hvinverski, <i>Haustlög</i>
<i>Hsq</i>	<i>Hymisqviða</i>
<i>Hsv</i>	<i>Hugsvinnsmál</i>
<i>Hynd</i>	<i>Hyndluljóð</i>
<i>Leið</i>	<i>Leiðarvísan</i>
<i>Lil</i>	<i>Lilja</i>
<i>Líkn</i>	<i>Líknarbraut</i>
<i>Lok</i>	<i>Lokasenna</i>
<i>Lsk</i>	Snorri Sturluson, <i>Litla Skálda</i>
<i>Magnkv</i>	Gísl Illugason, <i>Erfikvæði</i> about Magnús berfœttr
<i>Máls</i>	<i>Málsháttakvæði</i>

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<i>Mdr</i>	<i>Máriuðrápa</i>
<i>Mgr</i>	<i>Drápa af Máriugrát</i>
<i>Msp</i>	Gunnlaugr Leifsson, <i>Merlínusspá</i>
<i>Mv II</i>	<i>Máriuvísur II</i>
<i>Nkt</i>	<i>Nóregs konungatal</i>
<i>Reg</i>	<i>Reginsmál</i>
<i>Rþ</i>	<i>Rígsþula</i>
<i>Sigrdr</i>	<i>Sigrdrífumál</i>
<i>Sigsk</i>	<i>Sigurðarkviða in skamma</i>
<i>Skj</i>	<i>Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning</i> (ed. Finnur Jónsson)
<i>Skm</i>	Snorri Sturluson, <i>Skáldskaparmál</i>
<i>Sól</i>	<i>Sólarljóð</i>
<i>Svip</i>	<i>Svipdagsmál</i>
<i>Vafþr</i>	<i>Vafþrúðnismál</i>
<i>Vel</i>	Einarr skálaglamm Helgason, <i>Vellekla</i>
<i>Vldq</i>	<i>Völundarkviða</i>
<i>Vsp</i>	<i>Völuspá</i>
<i>Yng</i>	Snorri Sturluson, <i>Ynglinga saga</i>
<i>Þdr</i>	Eilífr Goðrúnarson, <i>Þórsdrápa</i>
<i>Þry</i>	<i>Þrymskviða</i>

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