







## SAGAS OF WARRIOR-POETS

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# SAGAS OF WARRIOR-POETS

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*Kormak's Saga*  
*The Saga of Hallfred Troublesome-poet*  
*The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-tongue*  
*The Saga of Bjorn, Champion of the Hitardal People*  
*Viglund's Saga*

*With an Introduction and Notes by*  
DIANA WHALEY

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## *Acknowledgements*

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Three-cornered dealings are not always easy, as the protagonists of the sagas of poets knew only too well, but I would like to thank all concerned for goodwill and shared enthusiasm for these remarkable sagas, especially Bernard Scudder of Leifur Eiríksson Publishing and Linda Vasey and Hilary Laurie of Penguin Books. Early drafts of the Introduction were also read by Vésteinn Ólason and Marlene Robertson, representing the ‘specialist’ and ‘interested non-specialist’ readership, and I am greatly indebted to them. Finally, all who work on Icelandic sagas learn a great deal from previous editors, commentators, lexicographers and others, and while it is not always possible to acknowledge specific debts, the listing of works in the Further Reading and the Note on the Translations mark our gratitude to them.

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An Icelandic champion famed for dragon-slaying abroad is ambushed by twenty-four men in a rock-strewn meadow. He offers a desperate defence using the shears with which he was about to trim his horses' manes... A famous poet and fighter spends an illicit night at the summer pastures with a woman he failed to marry long before. Her husband has no choice but to seek redress...

Composed in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and set over two hundred years earlier, the Icelandic sagas in this volume enact the meeting of the old Viking ethos of honour and heroic adventure with the newer ethos of romantic infatuation. The sagas about Kormakur Hallfred, Gunnlaug and Bjorn are distinguished by their combination of three important features, all of which appear in other sagas but rarely so prominently. First, at least one central character (usually the titular hero) is a skald, or poet, and hence the prose saga is exceptionally rich in poetic utterances; second, there is a 'love triangle' plot involving disappointed love and concomitant rivalry between the hero and the man who marries his beloved; and third, the hero's travels abroad, especially in the service of Scandinavian rulers, form a major strand in the narrative. It is on the basis of these features, together with certain literary links between them, that the first four sagas in this volume are customarily regarded as the classic sagas of poets, or skald sagas (Icelandic *skáldasögur*) – which is a modern, rather than medieval, grouping, but one of the most distinctive within the saga literature.<sup>1</sup> *Víglund's Saga*, though not usually counted within this group, has much in common with the sagas in it and is included here as an intriguingly fresh variation on the theme of a poet's love in adversity.

Meanwhile, the sagas of poets belong to the wider grouping of the Sagas of Icelanders, which in turn is part of the remarkable flowering of vernacular prose narrative in medieval Iceland. The authors' purpose in writing, it seems, was to entertain, to preserve and shape traditions about the past, and through them to explore issues of concern to their own societies. The mainly thirteenth-century authors of the Sagas of Icelanders cast their discerning gaze back to the Christianization of Iceland c. 1000, and beyond to the settlement period, c. 870–930. This saw the migration of thousands of families to a virtually uninhabited island just below the Arctic Circle.<sup>2</sup> Its interior was, and is, lava desert and glacier, but there was also rich pastureland. Many or most of these people came from western Norway, but others came from the Norse settlements in the British Isles, especially Ireland, western Scotland and the Hebrides, and these brought Celtic slaves with them, probably in quite large numbers. Once established, the first Icelanders formed a kingless, if scarcely egalitarian, society in which law was sovereign, at least in theory, and local and national assemblies attempted to balance the needs of individuals, families and the wider community in the ongoing struggle for scarce economic resources and the no less precious commodities of honour and social status. This Icelandic 'Commonwealth' survived until the Icelanders accepted Norwegian rule in 1262–4.

Like the other Sagas of Icelanders, the sagas of poets are set mainly in the dispersed farmsteads of Viking Age Iceland and are intensely preoccupied with neighbourhood conflict

its violent outcomes, and the possibility of resolution. Their art is quasi-dramatic and apparently realistic, and designed more for reading aloud than for private contemplation. Brief, formal sketches of the main dramatis personae are given at their first appearance, but otherwise character and motive emerge through action and dialogue. A medieval Icelandic audience would also have made deductions about status, personality and kinship loyalties from genealogical information. There is a certain amount of stereotyping and idealization, but many of the main characters have a complex mix of flaws and virtues which is quite rare in European medieval literature. Despite the intricate action and often profuse descriptive detail, nearly everything in the sagas is functional, contributing to the implacable advance of the plot as conflict gathers to a – usually tragic – climax, to be followed by revenge or reconciliation, or both. The sagas are constructed from fully staged scenes with vivid action and well honed dialogue, which are flanked and connected by rapid summaries of essential information. The narrator's voice is occasionally heard, for instance when he switches threads, tracing one rival's movements then another's, but in general it is restrained, rarely judging the characters, imputing feelings or motives to them or indulging in showy rhetoric or scenic description for its own sake. The result is a spare, stark but vibrant prose that has been compared with the 'hard-boiled' style of Ernest Hemingway or some of the Old Testament narratives. Meanwhile, the intricacy and apparent impartiality of much saga narrative give these works an open-endedness that offers fascinating scope for interpretation of their meaning and aesthetic qualities.

The skalds who dominate the first three of these sagas, Kormak, Hallfred and Gunnlaug, are famously difficult characters (as literary personae, whether or not they were so in life), and their awkward temperaments are associated with their poetic gifts. They are powerful and promising men of distinguished parentage and striking but not conventionally handsome appearance; they are dynamic, obstreperous, hot-tempered and serpent-tongued. They can be as much of an aggravation to their friends as to their enemies, and the moderate nature of others in the saga, often including the hero's brother or the rival lover, provides a foil to the hero's perversity. The attractive Bjorn and Viglund stand out from these stereotypes. Although they compose verse, they are given neither the status of skald nor a difficult personality; in the saga of Bjorn these attributes are borne primarily by his perennial rival, Thord Kolbeinsson.

The eponymous heroes all fall into a passionate, lifelong attachment to a woman who becomes locked into marriage to another man, and it is this that most clearly distinguishes the sagas of poets from other Sagas of Icelanders. Passion, albeit largely unexpressed, flickers through certain other sagas: most famously *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, in which Bolli returns to Iceland ahead of Kjartan and marries Kjartan's love, Gudrun, or *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, with its adulterous love triangle featuring Bjorn, Champion of the Breidavik People. In most sagas, however, male-female encounters are mainly linked to seductions or divorces which lead to litigation and hence function merely as nuts and bolts in the machinery of plot. Of the two works most often considered as sagas of poets but not included in this collection, *Egil's Saga* contains only an embryonic love story, and in *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers* the skaldship and philandering of Thormod play a relatively minor role, while his sworn brother Thorgeir disdains women altogether.

The protagonist's love is always returned in the sagas of poets, and although burgeoning

love is usually reported rather than shown, we see, for instance, the spark of interest kindling between Kormak and Steingerd through glimpses and whisperings amidst the farmhouse partitions. However, Kormak apprehends from the outset that his love is doomed (ch. 3). Like that of his fellow skalds, it is a love that feeds on adversity and absence. Viglund apart, none of the poets marries his beloved or gains more than momentary happiness with her, while none of the principal marriages is motivated by love. The widowed Bersi the Dueller in *Kormak's Saga* (ch. 7) and the bachelor Gris in *The Saga of Hallfred* (chs. 3–4) are brought in as eligible suitors to resolve the dilemma presented by the poet's relationship with the woman. So too is Hakon in *Viglund's Saga* (ch. 15), though the plot there has a twist. Hrafn in *The Saga of Gunnlaug* (chs. 9–10) and Thord in *The Saga of Bjorn* (ch. 5) appropriate the woman pledged to the hero, in Thord's case by falsely rumouring his death, but it is not desire, or not desire alone, that drives them.

Unwelcome visits to a woman, whether single or married, bring dishonour to the whole family ('there is disgrace in it to us all', *Kormak's Saga*, ch. 20), and violence can break out between the poet-hero and any one of the defensive male circle around her. As hostilities develop, other parts of the complex dynamic of honour come into play, as public redress is demanded, through reprisals or compensation, for slanders, infringement of rights, injuries and killings. In three of the sagas of poets, the animosity between the poet-hero and the husband forms a particularly strong axis. Gunnlaug's intense rivalry with Hrafn, both as partner to Helga and as poet to kings, is so crucial to his saga that it is headed 'the saga of Gunnlaug and Hrafn' in one manuscript. The bulk of *The Saga of Bjorn* is similarly occupied by the prolonged and vicious verbal and physical conflict between Bjorn and Thord, and it is almost as much Thord's saga as Bjorn's. As for Kormak in his saga, he has two main opponents to spar with, since Steingerd is married twice. The first husband, Bersi, has such prominence that he threatens to take over the first part of the saga, while the second, Thorvald, shares the adversarial role with his more forceful brother Thorvard. In *The Saga of Hallfred* the husband Gris is also a joint antagonist, with his pagan friend Mar, but in this saga hostilities against these characters do not dominate. Finally, the male rivalries in *Viglund's Saga* are complex and diffused, and the husband plays a relatively minor role.

Sorcery, fate, the duplicity of the rival or the perversity of the hero are shown as reasons for the hero's failure to marry the beloved, but there are more general factors too, practical, social and temperamental. As Gunnlaug prepares to seek fame and adventure abroad, both his father and his intended father-in-law point out the incompatibility of this with his commitment to Helga (ch. 5). This is the practical dilemma facing many ambitious young Icelanders, and it is at the root of the tragedy in the sagas of Gunnlaug and Bjorn. Further, the male–female encounters take place in the context of social hierarchies as finely gradated and as nervously observed as those of Jane Austen's England, and the differing social standing of the families involved may well have been understood by medieval saga audiences as determining the failure of Kormak and Hallfred to marry the women they desire.<sup>3</sup> Looked at still another way, from the viewpoint of literary typology, it is also clear that a life of marital harmony, a mellow old age and death in bed are neither the stuff of saga nor the likely outcome for heroes who feel contempt as well as envy for the husbands' easy life and sexual felicity (e.g., *Kormak's Saga* verses 53, 55 and 57). These poets have kinship both with old-style heroes such as Sigurd/Siegfried of the Volsung and Ni(e)belung legends, and with the

tragic lovers of Arthurian romance – Lancelot or Tristan.<sup>4</sup> For them, a life of action is the most important thing. Passionate love is possible, but only of a doomed or distant kind. Like their heroism, it will not be domesticated.

The problematic energies of the poet-heroes find an outlet and an arena abroad, and the amount of action overseas is a leading characteristic of the sagas of poets. The verbal brilliance and fighting strength that fuel slander and feud in Iceland win wealth and prestige abroad, in the service of princes and in raiding and trading.<sup>5</sup> The sagas of poets contain over two dozen appearances at royal courts, mainly within the wider Scandinavian-speaking world of Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Orkney and Dublin, though Gunnlaug's itinerary also takes in Russia and England. Some of the court visits are linked into the romantic plot, most notably in *The Saga of Gunnlaug*, while in the life of Hallfred there is a set of creative tensions, parallels and contrasts between his anguished love for an Icelandic beauty and his service of a Christian king of Norway. Others of the skalds' overseas adventures are less easy to account for, and some critics have felt that they detract from the taut advance of conflict and resolution, or that they sit uneasily with the love stories. However, the traditions concerning foreign adventures have their rightful place in the skalds' biographies, and they match – or rather, help to create – the restless character of the saga heroes.

So dominated are these sagas by male action and male aggression that one could see the female figures as nothing more than a commodity to be wrangled over by men, and love as little more than a pretext for rivalry. As Gunnlaug says of Helga, 'The woman was born to bring war between men' (verse 19). It is certainly true that the role of the female characters is defined and determined entirely by the men. The beautiful Oddny 'Isle-candle', though described as of strong personality, has a relatively slight role in *The Saga of Bjorn*, and it is only after bearing eight children by Thord that she discovers for certain that her first love, Bjorn, is still alive (ch. 10). Hallfred's Kolfinna, another fine woman, is as unable to determine her own fate as the others: 'Leave the arranging to those with a right to decide,' she tells him (ch. 4). Nevertheless, the erotic theme gives rise to a gallery of fine female portraits, from the lovely Helga of the wistful gaze and hair like burnished gold in *The Saga of Gunnlaug* to Kormak's sharp-tongued Steingerd. Uniquely, Steingerd takes some initiative in trying to seal a marriage with the poet (ch. 6), and insists on travelling abroad, even taking an active part in a sea-battle, though she is also kidnapped in a pirate attack (chs. 24–6). We also see women participating in the honour culture of the men. The most terrible example is the scornful fortitude with which Thordis in *The Saga of Bjorn* responds when faced with the severed head of her son (ch. 33). Thordis also stands as a reminder of the role of supporting female characters – mothers or sisters, servants or sorceresses. Few of them except the sorceresses are able to influence events by action (Steinvor, for instance, is merely used by Bersi for his own violent ends in *Kormak's Saga*, ch. 16), yet they form vital links in the plot, and within dialogues they advise, comment or simply act as necessary interlocutors. Similarly, although many of these women are stereotypes, the more developed of them, such as Kormak's resourceful mother Dalla, or the evil and neurotic Thorbjorg in *Viglund's Saga*, add to the rugged appeal of the sagas.

There is sufficient common ground among the five sagas of poets to amount almost to a shared narrative framework which, with certain stretching of detail (especially in the case of *Viglund's Saga*), can be summarized as follows:

1. Prelude (*Kormak's Saga*, *The Saga of Hallfred* and *Viglund's Saga*): Adventure(s) of the skald's father in Norway, and his emigration to Iceland; *The Saga of Bjorn* and *The Saga of Gunnlaug* begin in Iceland with few preliminaries or none.
2. Introduction of the hero. He develops a mutual attraction for a woman in the neighbourhood, spending time at her farm.
3. This presents social difficulties: the father, mindful of the family honour and the economic of matrimony, wants a firm betrothal. A rival for the woman's hand appears now or later.
4. The hero voyages in Scandinavia and (often) the British Isles, engaging in trade or raiding or spending periods in the service of rulers as warrior or court poet.
5. The beloved woman marries the rival, before or during the hero's absence abroad.
6. On return, the hero's bitter jealousy against his rival is enacted in aggression against him and his family and friends. This takes the form of some combination of:
  - fights (single combat or with supporters)
  - vitriolic verses (reciprocated or not)
  - legal action.His love for the woman finds expression in:
  - love verses
  - visiting, and sometimes sleeping with, her.
7. There may be further voyages abroad, containing adventures either related or unrelated to the love rivalry.
8. The hero dies, never having achieved lasting fulfilment of his obsessive love, nor having freed himself from it. Kormak and Hallfred meet accidental deaths in Scotland having effectively relinquished their claim to the beloved, but still haunted by her. Bjorn and Gunnlaug die fighting the rival. Viglund is the happy exception.
9. Epilogue/Aftermath: This is perfunctory in *Kormak's Saga*, *The Saga of Hallfred* and *Viglund's Saga*, while *The Saga of Gunnlaug* and *The Saga of Bjorn* have longish accounts of revenge and/or legal proceedings, ending with the focus on Helga and Thord respectively.

Despite so much common ground, each saga springs from a unique synthesis of historical moments with oral story and literary creativity, and the reader will find a wealth of subtle differences between them. The Plot Summaries on [pp. 290–301](#) and the following discussion of themes and narrative art in each of the five sagas will, it is hoped, provide some starting-points.

#### THEMES AND NARRATIVE ART

##### *Kormak's Saga*

Kormak's first meeting with Steingerd ([ch. 3](#)) is neatly motivated and beautifully staged using

the technique of 'limited viewpoint'. We see and hear the man and the woman each through the other's eyes and ears as they discuss what they see with a companion. The Icelandic farmhouse setting with its wood-stack, water-butt and sheep on the fellside frames the magnificent verses in which the 'beam from the eyelid-moon [eye] of the goddess of the golden torque [woman]' (v. 3) presages sorrow for them both. The fate of Kormak and Steingerd is set from the beginning, as is the saga's pungent combination of romance and realism.

Despite some fine episodes, and touches of telling characterization and dialogue, the saga has been seen by some critics as something of a structural disaster, an imperfectly designed vehicle for the verse quotations. There are many roughnesses in the prose narrative, duplicated incidents and materials not relevant to the main plot (such as Bersi's quarrels in chs. 15–16). Prose and verse are not always harmonized, while at some points it is clear that the prose is a rather heavy-handed attempt to explain an obscure item of poetic diction. However, the poet's obsession with the unattained beloved is an exceptionally strong thread which pulls the narrative together. The prelude inversely foreshadows Kormak's fate, since his father Ogmund wins the noble Helga by vanquishing a rival in a duel, and although Kormak's death is the result of a rash encounter with a Scottish giant and therefore externally unconnected with his love, his dying verses referring to Steingerd provide the connection. (The case of Hallfred is similar.)

The eighty-five verses in *Kormak's Saga* are remarkable in both number and quality. 'Cormac [Kormak] without the verse would be like *Hamlet* without the Ghost', as W. G. Collingwood put it.<sup>6</sup> The sixty-four verses attributed to Kormak almost all relate to Steingerd or to the male rivalry she unintentionally occasioned, and they contain some of the most splendid expressions of love and spite in European literature. The fifteen verses spoken by Kormak's rival Bersi range from colourful belligerence to the frustrated indignity of old age. However, poetry is not mentioned in the opening characterization of Kormak (ch. 2), and he is not portrayed in his known historical role as court poet to Earl Sigurd of Lade or King Harald Grey-cloak, although he serves the latter in the saga.

The hero's travels abroad are also less important than in the other sagas of poets. The saga is almost two-thirds over, and Steingerd is divorced and remarried, before Kormak sets sail (ch. 18). He makes two trips with his brother Thorgils, who is useful as an interlocutor and foil – a contrastive voice of moderation and reason. The first voyage occasions a sketchy account of the brothers' raiding expeditions and their part in a Norwegian triumph in Ireland but its main effect is to show that no amount of travel and adventure will distract Kormak from his hopeless love (chs. 18–19). The second journey, however, has the unique feature of an encounter between the poet-hero, his resourceful beloved Steingerd and her second husband Thorvald, which presents an opportunity for racy rescues from Viking pirates as well as amusing arbitration by King Harald over the Icelanders' kisses and quarrels (chs. 24–6).

The concentration of the action in Iceland gives maximum opportunity for Kormak to press his attentions on Steingerd. Her reactions are variable, but he never gains fulfilment with her even when they spend a night together, and his lingering kisses prove expensive. Even so, there is never an intense focus on the love triangle as such, as there is in *The Saga of Bjorn*. It is Kormak's complex and relentless quarrels with Steingerd's family and two successive husbands, and the embroilment of kinsmen and neighbours in these, that are in the spotlight

Kormak fights three of the six duels in the saga, and hostilities are conducted verbally as well as physically. A lull in the action is provided when Steingerd divorces Bersi and the narrative follows Bersi's quarrels over her dowry and other matters only minimally connected with Kormak. Meanwhile, Steingerd quietly marries Thorvald, providing Kormak with a new target for contempt.

Alongside the sublime poetic expressions of love and the serious concern with conflict, there flickers an almost picaresque quality in some incidents where the mercurial Kormak is subjected to various indignities – rowing after his rival in a leaky, overpriced boat, losing a duel for a mere scratch, and being capsized by his beloved (chs. 8, 10 and 25). He is the comic extreme of the hero with more courage than sense, and his family and supporters could all echo the seeress Thordis in saying that 'helping you will be far from easy' (ch. 22). Chapters 9–11, for instance, show Kormak wilfully abusing the magic sword Skofnung, and at his death 'people bewailed the fact that he should have acted so imprudently' (ch. 27). There is, however, a double layer of causation: human and supernatural. It is not only Kormak who believes that external forces blighted his union with Steingerd – that 'evil spirits or adverse destinies had prevented it from the start' (ch. 26) – but also the narrator, who attributes the cooling of his feelings to the sorceress Thorveig's spell (ch. 6). Indeed, sorcery and magic weapons and objects play an exceptionally strong part in this saga set a few decades before the formal acceptance of Christianity in Norway and Iceland. But is the supernatural machinery merely 'period' scenery, or part of the meaning of the saga? Are malign forces at work, or is the root of Kormak's tragedy within himself: in his restlessness, his romantic refusal to negotiate for his love, or his (possibly subliminal) reluctance to take a bride from a socially inferior family? The reader is left to wonder how the saga author meant his Christian audience to view the balance of fate and human responsibility.

### *The Saga of Hallfred Troublesome–poet*

Here, as in *Kormak's Saga*, we watch a perverse hero making his way in an imperfect and unpredictable world: a headstrong poet who relishes freedom of action but four times finds himself in chains. In terms of plot, the saga is distinguished especially by the weight and diversity of the hero's adventures abroad, and the separation of these from the Icelandic love affair and its ramifications. It is almost as if there were two sagas, one entwined within the other.<sup>8</sup>

In the scenes set in Iceland, virtually everything that happens to Hallfred relates to his passion for Kolfinna. So too, obliquely, does the prelude set in the previous generation, and showing Ottar's and Avaldi's emigration from Norway to Iceland, for these oldest and closest of friends are to be the fathers of the two lovers, and of sons one of whom will kill the other because of the love affair. This is almost a reverse *Romeo and Juliet* plot, in which tragic discord arises in spite of interfamilial friendship, and if the lovers are star-crossed, their unhappy fate springs more from Hallfred's wilfulness than from external circumstances. Similarly, the episode in which the chieftain's son Ingolf woos Hallfred's sister Valgerd and composes verses about her anticipates and duplicates the main plot, emphasizing the social disruption caused by an unregulated liaison (chs. 2–3). Further, the determination of Ottar, father of Valgerd, to mount a legal action against his social superior, Ingolf's father Thorstein

may be seen as a piece of foolish hubris for which the penalty is heavy – Ottar’s forced departure from the district.<sup>9</sup>

Hallfred’s teenage romance is hardly under way before his defiance of social mores brings trouble. When, in a deftly staged scene, he sits Kolfinna on his knee and kisses her in full view of the party who have come to ask for her hand, he seems more intent on provocation than seduction (ch. 4), and the pattern of provocation and ensuing chase and skirmish repeats when the love plot resumes much later, in chs. 9–10. After a long absence, Hallfred spends a night at the shieling-huts with Kolfinna and slanders Gris, but this time with fatal consequences – first the unintended death of Einar Thorisson, and later the revenge killing of Hallfred’s brother Galti.

Hallfred sails abroad with Kolfinna’s name on his lips after her betrothal to Gris has been announced (ch. 5), and he thinks of her as he dies at sea off Iona (ch. 11), but otherwise, Hallfred’s emotional energy is deployed elsewhere during his foreign travels. He is the only one of the skalds in these sagas to marry abroad, and his grief over his wife Ingibjorg’s death is touching (ch. 9). It is, however, King Olaf Tryggvason who forms the hub of Hallfred’s wheeling fortunes overseas, and Olaf’s centrality is emphasized by the fact that little is made of Hallfred’s visits to four other rulers. The bond forms when the king, incognito, rescues Hallfred and his crew from a storm that is symbolic of the poet’s perilous heathen state, and cajoles him into conversion to Christianity (ch. 5).<sup>10</sup> From then on Hallfred is driven by a desire to earn his liege’s favour, though this is frequently at odds with the dictates of his own stubborn will. Inseparable from this is the parallel conflict between Hallfred’s new religion and his residual paganism, which is treated with some sympathy and even benign humour, as in the account of Hallfred’s minimalist Christian devotions (end of ch. 8).

The plot may be somewhat episodic and occasionally inept (some examples being mentioned in the notes), yet the saga has much to offer. There is some striking visualization and folk-tale atmospherics, for instance in Hallfred’s ‘mission’ to Thorleif the Wise, or in the night-long trauma in which Onund, in spite of having been skewered by Hallfred’s knife, pounds on the door of the forest refuge (chs. 6, 7). Further, a marvellous tissue of thematic strands emerges from individual episodes in the context of the whole saga. In Hallfred’s approach to Thorleif the Wise, for instance, his physical disguise of beggar’s garb and disfigured face is only the most obvious manifestation of a much larger theme of appearance and reality, and its verbal counterpart, Hallfred’s dissembling speech, raises questions of truth and falsehood: “I’m just a pauper,” [Hallfred] said, “I went to the king and he wanted to force his religion on me, but I ran away under cover, and before that killed one of the king’s men. Now I want to ask you for some protection” (ch. 6). Though dishonest in purpose – a means to effect the blinding of Thorleif – Hallfred’s claim to have killed one of Olaf’s men is perfectly true, and his reference to a coerced conversion is at least half-true. He only pretends to seek protection here, but fabrication will turn into reality much later on when Thorleif the Wise saves his life (ch. 11). Thorleif, meanwhile, is almost Hallfred’s alter ego, an embodiment of recalcitrant but not unattractive paganism. The Thorleif episode thus typifies the work as a whole, for this is a saga full of betrayals of trust, reversals, contradictions, disguises and other mismatches of appearance and reality. Hallfred exclaims at one point, ‘Who will be true to me, then, if my father breaks faith?’ (ch. 4);<sup>11</sup> he almost meets death at the hands of the confidence trickster Onund and the genial host Bjorn, and he



is cheated by bereavement at the moment when a loving marriage and reconciliation with God and the king seem to guarantee happiness (chs. 7, 8 and 9). But good also comes from surprising quarters: not only from Thorleif, but also from Hallfred's rival Gris, who, when Hallfred backs out of a duel, is the only one to understand the reason (ch. 10).

The restless and complex narrative is in fact ideally suited to its central character, who is introduced as unreliable and unpopular, who has no real reason for not marrying his beloved and who wins the nickname 'Troublesome-poet' (*vandræðaskáld*, literally 'skald of problems/troubles'). A kind of resolution is reached at the end of the saga, however. The two main narrative strands of Hallfred's fortunes at home and abroad are eventually united, for King Olaf's dream-borne moral authority also extends to Iceland, where he prevents Hallfred from going ahead with his duel against Gris. The religious contradictions are also dissolved in the last scenes. Storm-tossed and fatally injured by a swinging boom, Hallfred, in true pagan style, sees his fetch (the embodiment of his personal spirit) and bids farewell to her. His death follows swiftly, then the dream-inspired recovery of his body and the recasting of his gifts from King Olaf as ecclesiastical vessels. Seen from one point of view, this is an eccentric juxtaposition of literary motifs, but from another, it exemplifies the humane and synthesizing intelligence that pervades the work. The heroine does not come to hate her husband Gris, who is decent, though short on sexual charisma. Neither Gris nor Hallfred meets a violent end (though Hallfred does try to kill him), and Gris and Kolfinna, we presume, live unhappily ever after. The hero attracts trouble, and does some appalling things, including two partial blindings and five killings, not all justified. Yet at the bidding of Olaf Tryggvason he grudgingly accepts arbitration in place of a duel against Gris and forgoes revenge against Earl Eirik. He is not only buried on the Holy Isle of Iona but is also perpetuated in his son, who despite inheriting both his names – Hallfred and 'Troublesome-poet' – grows up to be successful and prolific. The implicit message seems to be that this specimen of erring humanity is redeemed in the end.

### *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-tongue*

In many ways the most shapely of these sagas, and hitherto the best known among English-speaking readers, *The Saga of Gunnlaug* combines an intensely focused version of the romantic plot with an unusually rich catalogue of court appearances by its poet-hero. There are few episodes or characters that could be counted as extraneous. The Norwegian sea-captain Bergfinn, for instance, enters the narrative only to interpret Thorstein's premonitory dream in a finely staged conversation, and is then 'out of the saga' (ch. 2).

The imaginative power of the love theme owes much to the portrayal of Helga the Fair, tinged as it is with new currents of romantic taste. She forms the passive centre of the saga, and her birth and death frame it. Her love for Gunnlaug is never in doubt. Unlike other saga heroines, she never affects cold resignation to her situation, but rests longing eyes on her unattainable lover and accepts both his poetry and his gift of the splendid cloak presented to him by King Ethelred (ch. 11). She gazes at the cloak as she dies in the arms of her second husband (ch. 13).

The overseas adventures of Gunnlaug are tightly integrated with the love story, for the tragic rivalry between Gunnlaug and Hrafn springs up at the court of the Swedish king, and

only ends when they fight to the death overseas. Gunnlaug's audiences at court, meanwhile, range through the whole spectrum of the stereotypes offered by stories of this sort. The first is far from a triumph. Gunnlaug may bring to his audience with Earl Eirik excellent family connections and an introduction from the distinguished Skuli Thorsteinsson, but when he displays a boorish lack of tact that matches his homespun garb he is lucky to escape with his life (ch. 6). Later, the comically inexperienced Earl Sigtrygg Silk-beard in Dublin has to be counselled against rewarding him with two ships for his poetry, while the mighty King Olaf of Sweden keeps itinerant poets in their place (chs. 8, 9). Essentially though, Gunnlaug matures, even turning diplomat on one occasion (ch. 8), like some of the greatest skalds. On return to Iceland the question of Helga comes to the fore, and Gunnlaug's second set of voyages abroad appears as a muted and shortened refrain of the first. In his last two court visits, he is entirely preoccupied with resolving his quarrel with Hrafn (ch. 12).

The theme of male rivalry attains the greatest tragic dignity in this saga. It is heightened by the essentially admirable character sketch of Hrafn in ch. 5, and by the initial friendship of Gunnlaug and Hrafn, both skalds. Later, there is a poignant moment of fellow-feeling between them when they decide to lance the boil of enmity by fighting abroad (ch. 11). Despite that enmity, and despite the fact that the last sixteen verses of the saga arise from the yearning and strife caused by Helga, the saga contains almost no poetic invective.

The plot hinges on injured pride, for Hrafn's perfidious bid for Helga is made as he smartens from a publicly delivered slight about his person and poetry from his one-time friend Gunnlaug (ch. 9). Interestingly, Hrafn's second, fatal, act of treachery is motivated instead by despair over the failure of his marriage (ch. 12), but the hostility between the two men has a dynamic of its own. Gunnlaug's attentions to Helga after her marriage are enough to provoke Hrafn, but he deliberately adds to them by making as if to ride him down (ch. 11). Gunnlaug is susceptible to goading too, when two Norwegians' scoffing mimicry of the Icelanders stiffens his resolve to press on with the quarrel to its bitter end, and the saga mounts to a tragic climax with the tense pursuit to Dingenes and the heroics and anti-heroics of the fight there (ch. 12).

At the human level, the tragedy is a product of emotion, circumstance and individual choice: love and the desire for honour, the incompatibility of marriage and a successful career abroad (pointed out twice to Gunnlaug in ch. 5), and Gunnlaug's decision, apparently, to prolong his service of King Ethelred beyond strict necessity (ch. 10). Yet the saga also allows the possibility of a deterministic view, not least through the author's comment, 'and events had to take their course' (ch. 11), and it seems like a cruel trick of fate that Gunnlaug's arrival home exactly coincides with the marriage feast of Hrafn and Helga, ensuring maximum unhappiness for all (ch. 10).

The premonitory dream experienced by Thorstein in the opening of the saga may also suggest the limits of human choice (ch. 2). Two eagles fight to the death over a swan, who sorrows and then flies away with a gentle hawk, and this, in Bergfinn's interpretation, presages the tragedy that Thorstein's lovely daughter, as yet unborn, will unwillingly occasion. As a literary device, the dream is a graphic and compelling way of unifying the action through a pattern of anticipation and fulfilment, but it may also imply that the eventual outcome is not merely foreseen but predetermined. Despite Thorstein's 'dreams don't mean anything' (ch. 2) and his rejection of Bergfinn's interpretation, he makes

spasmodic attempts to defy fate, always in vain.

Though skilled in evoking vivid scenes, the narrator of *The Saga of Gunnlaug* can be obtrusive, given to breaking in with pedantic source references, including a solemn assurance that ‘learned men say’ that Helga was the loveliest Icelandic woman ever (ch. 4). Equally intrusive but perhaps more meaningful is the distance created when the narrator draws attention to the temporal and cultural gulf between his own milieu and the world inhabited by his characters some two hundred and fifty years earlier. Dominating the landscape of the saga-writer’s past is the adoption of Christianity in the year 1000, ‘the best thing ever to have happened in Iceland’ (ch. 5). Like other sagas whose events straddle the Conversion, including *Njal’s Saga*, this one has to confront the question of its ethical impact. The saga is doubtless honest in the overall impression it gives that the Conversion stopped far short of the wholesale embrace of humility and forgiveness urged in the teachings of Christ. Duelling may have been made illegal, forcing Gunnlaug and Hrafn to settle their differences in mainland Scandinavia, but when Gunnlaug’s family are insufficiently compensated for his death, the old ethic of satisfying honour by revenge prevails.

### *The Saga of Bjorn, Champion of the Hitardal People*

This bleakly fascinating saga ends with Bjorn dead after a valiant defence against attackers who vastly outweigh him in numbers and viciousness. His antagonist Thord Kolbeinsson, after the glow of triumph fades, is left once more dissatisfied and humiliated. Relentlessly focused on the enmity of the two men and its impact on the wider Icelandic community, the saga contains only rather minimal versions of the other characteristic elements of the sagas of poets – the adventures abroad, the love affair, and the stereotyped skald figure in central position.

For once, the titular hero is handsome in both looks and behaviour. He engages in venomous poetic sparring matches with Thord, but he is not introduced as a skald. (Although the opening chapters are supplied from a text of *The Saga of St Olaf* to fill a gap in the *Saga of Bjorn* manuscript, they give quite a full account of Bjorn’s early life.) Bjorn wins favour with Earl Eirik Hakonarson and King Olaf Haraldsson for his noble character and dashing feats of valour, not for poetry (chs. 2, 3, 9). His arena of action is wider, and his exploits more exotic than any in the sagas of poets, as he slays the champion Kaldimar in Russia and a flying dragon in England (chs. 4, 5). He takes home with him the sobriquet of ‘Champion’, and lives up to it, though the heroics demanded by everyday life in Iceland can be of a quieter kind: he is even glimpsed helping mother with the washing (ch. 11). Thord, by contrast, composes *drápur* (singular *drápa*, a formal eulogy with refrains) for Eirik and Olaf, and gains splendid rewards from Olaf, though he has to surrender some of these to Bjorn as compensation (chs. 7, 8). Unlike the other skald figures, Thord is no warrior. His puny physique (if the taunts against the ‘little lad’ are justified), cowardly manipulations and eloquent duplicity are the perfect antithesis to the mighty and glamorous Bjorn. However, neither antagonist has a monopoly of good behaviour. Bjorn’s killing of Thorkel Dalksson, for example, technically justified but clearly excessive, gives Thord the chance to make the magnanimous gesture of compensating Dalk (ch. 20).

Bjorn’s relationship with Oddny Isle-candle develops early and is smiled upon by ‘many

people' (ch. 1), but no narrative capital is made out of this trigger to the saga's action. Despite the assertion of her outstanding looks and character (ch. 1), the figure of Oddny is lightly drawn, just sufficient to explain the sexual jealousy that pervades the tense and claustrophobic winter that the members of the triangle pass together (chs. 12–14). Bjorn's claim to be the father of Kolli also declares an adulterous liaison with Oddny (verses 12, 29, ch. 32), but this happens off stage. Bjorn marries another woman, Thordis (the marriage itself presumably taking place in a section now lost), while it is only after Bjorn is dead and Oddny ill from grief that Thord regrets the loss of Oddny's love and aspires to any kind of pathos: 'It seemed to him a great disaster that had come to them and to Bjorn all together' (ch. 33).

The antagonism between Thord and Bjorn appears more fevered than their feelings for Oddny. Uniquely, it is established in the very first chapter of the (reconstructed) saga, when Bjorn, aged about twelve, opts to live with his older cousin Skuli Thorsteinsson in order to avoid unspecified 'aggression' with which Thord, some fifteen years his senior, harasses Bjorn and others. That this aggression consisted of homoerotic advances has been suggested, and although this cannot be proven, there is a highly charged strand of sexual insult in the dealings between the two men, which reaches its most graphic and public when Bjorn uses a carving and a verse to portray Thord as the passive partner in a homosexual act (ch. 17). The icon is more about aggression than sex, and the symbolic emasculation would have been understood as a metaphor for abject cowardice; it doubtless also functions as a displaced expression of the sexual rivalry over Oddny. Whether there is also an allusion to actual homoerotic behaviour is, again, uncertain.<sup>12</sup>

The running duel of poetic insults, lawsuits and plots which occupies chs. 10–26 is exceptionally long, complex and rather episodic, yet there is progress from verbal to physical strife, and momentum in the mounting severity and directness of Thord's attacks. There is also a neatness in the replication of similar incidents: both men suffer a humiliation involving an animal which the other mocks in verse, both harbour outlaws, and there are triplets of slayings by Bjorn and ambushes arranged by Thord.<sup>13</sup> The entry of Thorstein Kuggason into the saga in ch. 27, as he and his party take chilly refuge from the blizzard at Bjorn's farm, provides a narrative landmark, after which the pace slows while the action intensifies. Arbitration is tried and abandoned, then 'conflict' motifs, many of them paralleled elsewhere, build to a climax: premonitory dreams, a splendidly staged ambush including a farm-boy's description of the advancing enemies, a scene of understated tragedy across drawn weapons between Bjorn and his putative son Kolli, and the hero's last stand. His enemy dead, Thord displays pungent contrasts of behaviour – bitter callousness in his public flaunting of Bjorn's detached head, and patient tenderness towards the heartbroken Oddny (ch. 33).

The impact of violence ripples out from the Thord–Bjorn epicentre to affect the whole community, and many others play a part, as bereaved relatives, inciters, assassins, conspirators, arbitrators or commentators, in adjusting the delicate controls that determine peace or strife. The saga becomes almost a casebook of provocations, conflicts, and attempts at resolution through out-of-court compensation, enforced redress, the legal penalties of lesser or greater outlawry or fines, and blood revenge. Thorstein Kuggason articulates the idea that compensation and outlawry, but not blood revenge, are fitting expedients for Christian men who have been wronged (ch. 29); but there is no pretence that finding appropriate solutions is easy. After all, even wise arbitration from the saintly King Olaf of

Norway failed to settle the feud between Thord and Bjorn ([ch. 8](#)). The saga risks anticlimax by a careful account of the legal proceedings following the death of Bjorn, closing at the point when ‘interest in the affair began to die down’. Vivid events and strong or difficult characters are the lifeblood of saga narratives, but given the chance, moderation will eventually prevail and – in saga as in life – the community will go quietly about its business.

The most important feature of the action abroad is the role of King Olaf. His court is the stage for the quick souring of attempted friendship between Thord and Bjorn, while the close and admiring comradeship between the king and Bjorn intensifies the narrative bias towards the latter. Bjorn’s acquisition, by accident commuted to gift, of cross-garters belonging to the king, and his wearing of them until he dies, become symbolic of their relationship and hence of Bjorn’s standing, which is otherwise implausibly reduced once he returns to Iceland. The treatment of the royal gift as if a holy relic ([chs. 9](#) and [32](#)) gives Bjorn a share in Olaf’s sanctity in a way reminiscent of the close of *The Saga of Hallfred*, and this King Olaf, like his namesake, Hallfred’s patron Olaf Tryggvason, exerts a moral influence in the career of the Icelander. At the Branno islands, Bjorn spares Thord because he is the retainer of the sovereign whom Bjorn admires but has not yet met ([ch. 7](#)); and he leaves off raiding at the bidding of the king, who deems it a violation of God’s law ([ch. 9](#)). He finds it less easy to abandon his vendetta against Thord. Christianity is not fully developed as a theme, but Bjorn’s building of a church and composing of a drapa in honour of St Thomas mark him as, at least, religiously well intentioned. It is in this church that Bjorn’s hacked body is laid to rest.

### *Viglund’s Saga*

The final saga in this volume is a splendid complement, even antidote, to the first four. Set earlier than they, in the reign of King Harald Fair-hair (up to c. 932), but written later (c. 1400), it contains much that is familiar. The distinctive features of the sagas of poets are present – a poet-hero and a plot involving frustrated love, travels abroad and male rivalry – and the narrative world is that of the Sagas of Icelanders. [Chapter 7](#), for instance, opens, ‘There was a man called Holmkel who lived at Foss’, and continues with the expected genealogy and Icelandic place-names, and most of this detail is matched in that treasury of respected tradition, *The Book of Settlements* ([ch. 77](#)). Scenes such as the ball game, incitement and battle among the frozen hayricks in [ch. 14](#) are also firmly in the idiom of the Sagas of Icelanders, and if occasional details such as a harp with gold and silver strings, an orchard or pastimes such as hunting transport us temporarily into a world of foreign romance, they are rarities in the saga and confined to the scenes set in Norway.

Nevertheless, the writer takes several steps in the direction of romance, not only offering ‘happy ever after’ ending but also achieving it by patterns of character, motivation and plot that are often quite unlike those of the classic sagas of poets. Viglund is not a stereotypical skald. Rather, he is an idealized hero who occasionally speaks in verse. His suspiciously non-traditional name means ‘Battle-mind’, and supported only by his brother Trausti (‘Trusty’), he prevails against twelve attackers, juggling deftly with shield and axe in order to dispatch one of his main rivals ([ch. 16](#), cf. [ch. 14](#)). Viglund is also the ideal lover, and the enduring passion of Viglund and Ketilrid shines out from the saga, though with rare exceptions the author gives

little ground to sentimentality. For a Kormak or Bjorn, the desire to humiliate the opposition seems even to outweigh desire for the woman, who is effectively lost to the hero. Viglund's priority, by contrast, is always to win Ketilrid, and his love poetry is unmixed with spite. Ketilrid's first husband, Hakon, is only a short-lived instrument of the malevolence of others. The saga hence lacks intense and sustained antagonism between the male rivals, becoming instead an elaborate illustration of the axiom that true love flourishes in adversity (ch. 12), and a demonstration of the possibility that goodwill and restraint can triumph. Indeed, Viglund is only intermittently centre-stage, and although his noble valour plays its part, there is the sense of a larger, rather schematic struggle going on around him. Those of goodwill (Viglund's father Thorgrim, brother Trausti and uncle Helgi, and Ketilrid's father Holmkel) are ranged against those driven by malice (Ketilrid's mother Thorbjorg, and brothers Jokul and Einar and their allies), while the process of the plot gradually brings the Norwegian party (Ketil, Gunnlaug and Sigurd) over to the side of harmony and reason.

In fact, of course, there are two situations of love in adversity, for in the extended Norwegian prelude, Viglund's father Thorgrim is in competition with Ketil of Raumarike, the favourite of King Harald, for his beloved Olof. The repercussions of Thorgrim's swashbuckling abduction of Olof interweave with the life of Viglund. The Norwegian Hakon sent out by Ketil as a surrogate avenger against Thorgrim, also becomes the tool of spite against Thorgrim's sons, and the working-out of the plot involves the resolution of both sets of problems through action in Iceland and Norway.

The mainspring of the action in Iceland is the unexplained hostility of Thorbjorg to her daughter Ketilrid, unique in the Sagas of Icelanders and unusual in romance, though reminiscent of the wicked stepmothers of fairy-tale. It is shared by Ketilrid's brothers Jokul and Einar, who are also driven by envy of Thorgrim's standing in the neighbourhood. Even their horse Blackie is vicious, and Thorbjorg's friend Kjolvor uses witchcraft to try to drown Viglund and his brother (chs. 9, 12). Holmkel, devoted father to Ketilrid and staunch friend to Thorgrim, produces much of the narrative interest. He may appear not man enough to defend his wife and sons, but he wins the day for the young lovers by a deft stratagem which on the surface will appeal to his wife's malice. Suspense is maintained until the magnificent last scene where, rather in the manner of a comic opera, almost the entire cast gathers on stage to hear some startling revelations and witness no fewer than three happy unions.<sup>14</sup>

We are, then, after all in a rather different world, in terms of plot, character, morality and atmosphere, from that of the classic sagas of poets. There are many similarities to European romance literature: testing of the hero's virtue through trials and adventures, exploration of familial relationships, a partially exotic setting and a happy ending. The basic two-tiered plot with son succeeding father as the central figure, is especially characteristic of bridal-quest romances.<sup>15</sup> This is not, then, a decadent outgrowth of the Sagas of Icelanders, but a transformation and hybridization of the genre by an author who clearly relished his literary freedom and used it to take a feud plot in an unusually optimistic direction. He ends his saga with a verse epilogue that explicitly waives his copyright, and thanks God 'if the story has been a pleasure'. For most readers, it undoubtedly will be.

## POETRY

The power of words is a running preoccupation of the Sagas of Icelanders. Themselves a product of great verbal artistry, the sagas portray a culture in which praise, blame, vows, curses, slanders and taunting nicknames play a vital part in the social dynamics.<sup>16</sup> For most of the saga characters, personal and family honour are more important than life, and words, especially poetic words, are the makers or breakers of public reputation. No wonder, then, that the gift of poetry was both cherished and feared, and its mythological origins as the mead or drink of Odin frequently recalled, as when Bjorn declares 'I mix beer for Odin' in v. 32 of his saga.

Poets often figure among the *dramatis personae* of Icelandic sagas, and other characters not formally introduced as poets speak, on occasion, in verse. Even within this poetry-minded genre, though, the sagas of poets are remarkable for the way in which historical skalds have been placed centre-stage and elevated into literary stereotypes. Outstanding too is the amount and variety of verse quoted within them:<sup>17</sup> poetry of praise, slander and love, travelogue, and verses associated with combat. Without the verses, many of the episodes in these sagas, including several in *Kormak's Saga* and the whole central section of *The Saga of Bjorn*, would simply not be there.

Scandinavian rulers gave rich rewards for elaborate poetic eulogies in the form of the *drapa*, or the *flokk* (eulogy without refrains). Dozens of skalds are known to have composed at the courts of Scandinavia from the ninth to thirteenth centuries, for their names are catalogued in the *List of Poets (Skáldatal)*, and after AD 1000 most of the court poets were Icelanders seeking fame, reward and a suitable outlet for their energy and talent. Many of them make appearances in the Icelandic or Norwegian Sagas of Kings or in short tales (*thættir*).

In Iceland, the social functions of poetry were quite different. Battle-verses mainly bragged of the speaker's own exploits, and poetry could be a potent tool of aggression. The laws encoded in the mainly thirteenth-century *Grágás* ('Grey Goose') imposed heavy penalties for poetic slander, or for poetry in praise of women, since this compromised their marriage prospects and constituted a threat to their menfolk. Hallfred ruefully notes that he has to compensate Gris for a 'scrap of verse' with the jingling gold he received from his royal patrons (v. 29). The cost is, moreover, not just financial. Verse obscenities in *The Saga of Bjorn* are paid for in one case with death, and Thord's erupting resentment at the imbalance in slander-verses reopens old wounds, and dashes all hopes of reconciliation (chs. 20, 29).

In both form and content, the poetry found in the sagas obeys fundamentally different laws from those of the prose, especially in respect of metre, diction and word order. Its central figurative device, the kenning, draws on myth, legend and the world of nature to express common concepts in striking and often riddling ways – 'man' as 'tree of treasure' or 'Odin of the sword', 'woman' as 'Freyja of jewellery', gold as 'blaze of the sea' or 'ship' as 'stallion of the waves' (see further, 'The Techniques of Skaldic Poetry', pp. 322–6). When inlaid within prose narratives, forming the *prosimetrum* composition so beloved of Icelandic writers as of others in medieval Europe,<sup>18</sup> the poetry therefore has a contrastive and decorative function, thrown into relief by the directness of the surrounding prose. Within the sagas of poets it also plays a dynamic role, either forming part of the action or dialogue (as when the protagonists hurl abuse at one another in a fight) or reflecting on events soon afterwards. Unlike much

medieval poetry, it is not communal and utilitarian, promoting collective values, but rather at least purports to express individual emotion. Even more than the dialogue, it reveals the interior state of characters, and hence complements the normally reticent prose narrative. Gris, for instance, not known for eloquence, is given a verse whose intertwining clauses capture eddies of feeling: pity for his swollen-eyed wife Kolfinna, mingled with suspicion and fury ( *The Saga of Hallfred*, v. 25).<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, love poetry as such is poorly represented, except in *Kormak's Saga*; and v. 28 of *The Saga of Hallfred*, with its marvellous image of Kolfinna like a gilded ship sailing between islands, is something of a rarity. More often, romantic longing is interlaced with hatred and scorn for the woman's husband ( *The Saga of Hallfred*, vv. 18–19), or the poet torments himself by contrasting his present hardships, at sea or in battle, with the sensual comforts of the married couple, sometimes grossly imagined ( *The Saga of Hallfred*, vv. 4 and 33). Then there is the poetry of sexual insult and pure spite, brought to grotesque perfection in the 'Grey-belly Satire' (*The Saga of Bjorn*, ch. 20).

The verse quotations may also have trained saga audiences in certain ways of interpreting the prose. The metaphors inherent in much of the poetic diction may have encouraged the perception that, for instance, treasure is both a material reality and a symbol of status and of social relations between lord and retainer or lover and beloved; seafaring is the outward expression of a restless and possibly erotically excited mind. Further, both skaldic poetry and saga narratives demand alertness and skilful anticipation of stereotypical patterns in their audiences. In the poetry, the elements of kennings and parts of clauses are often widely separated, while narrative patterns of anticipation and fulfilment or action and reaction abound in the saga narratives – and naturally so, given their preoccupation with feuds, vows, prophecies and omens. Viglund's conditional vow not to cut or wash his hair cues the audience to expect its fulfilment, for example (chs. 18, 23), while the appearance of Thorleif the Wise as the *deus ex machina* who rescues Hallfred fulfils a promise made long before (*The Saga of Hallfred*, chs. 6, 11).<sup>20</sup>

To what extent, we may ask finally, do the verses genuinely belong to their supposed creators? The small scraps from court poems, for instance Gunnlaug's almost idolatrous praise of King Ethelred (v. 3), are probably authentic, but the freestanding occasional verses on love and strife are extremely difficult to date. They have been viewed with some scholarly scepticism, on the evidence of their content, style, language or metre, but metrical evidence adduced by Kari Ellen Gade suggests that many of the 'Kormak' and 'Hallfred' verses may genuinely belong to the late tenth century or beginning of the eleventh,<sup>21</sup> though this does not of course prove that they were composed in the (often unlikely) circumstances depicted in the sagas. Most of the verses in *The Saga of Gunnlaug* and some in *The Saga of Bjorn* appear to be later, composed at some stage after the lifetime of the poets but before the composition of the saga prose, while those in *Viglund's Saga* may be the work of the saga-writer himself. Beyond this it is difficult to go – regrettably, since many questions about the historical basis of these sagas and about their literary development depend crucially on the age and role of the poetry.



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