Skaldic Slam:
Performance Poetry in the Norwegian Royal Court

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DEDICATION AND DISCLAIMER

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SKALDIC SLAM: PERFORMANCE POETRY IN THE NORWEGIAN ROYAL COURT

Introduction

Slam, simply put, is the competitive art of spoken-word poetry.¹ In modern slam contests, performers go head-to-head in a bid to increase their reputation and outshine their opponents, relying on audience interaction and reaction for the final verdict. During a live performance, the slam poet not only engages a distinctive isochronic rhythm and dynamic use of his or her sound and space, voice and visual, but also uses his or her verbal artistry to broadcast twenty-first century social and political issues.² In short, unlike the ‘academic’ concept of poetry as written literature that lives only in between the silent pages of books, slam poets rely on a wholly oral mode of transmission and therefore these poets compose their poems specifically for live performance on the stage, not on the page.³ Whilst medieval Scandinavian court poetry might at first seem far removed from the modern phenomenon of underground poetry slams, the so-called skaldic praise poems that were composed in the ninth- and tenth-century Norwegian royal court arguably share many similarities with modern-day slam. The most obvious point of comparison lies in the fact that the early Scandinavian court skálds (Old Norse ‘poets’) were composing in a pre-literary oral environment, meaning that their poems were not composed as silent static objects to pinned down on parchment.⁴ Instead, like modern slam artists, it seems likely that skálds composing in an oral environment would have show-cased their poems as acoustic sound within physical space, as a communal audience experience to be presented before the


² For example, see: Makkai, K., Pretty, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7TS2Z6lAI4 (viewed 25 November, 2014).

³ It is important to point out that the dichotomy between poems composed for the page and poems composed for live performance is by no means black and white. Modern poetic composition, for example, often engages a fluid process involving a combination of oral (such as acoustic, aural sound), performative (engaging the body, audience and performance space) and literary (writing) techniques. This complex subject area has been dealt with extensively by both oral and modern poetry scholars, and is discussed in Chapter 2.

⁴ According to the written tradition of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelandic manuscripts, many Norse skálds (poets) were composing in a wholly oral period before the arrival of Christianity and thus before literacy. Nonetheless, whilst most scholars generally agree on the oral pre-history of skaldic verse, there is still a great deal of debate regarding the dating and authenticity (i.e. as early oral poems and not medieval literary creations) of various verses and poems. This is a huge subject area, and one that I deal with more thoroughly in Chapter 1.1-1.9 below.
judgement of the court. In short, we should never forget that like modern slam, skaldic poetry was performance poetry, and the poet was a performer.

Although pre-Christian Scandinavian skálds operated in a time and culture that was completely different from the culture of coffee-shop slams and national spoken-word contests of today, it nonetheless seems that the competitive nature of spoken-word poetry thrived in ninth- and tenth-century Scandinavia (see Chapters 3 and 4). In particular, rulers such as the ninth-century Norwegian King Haraldr hárfragri (‘fine-haired’) and the tenth-century Jarl Hákon harboured their own poetic empires of court skálds whose performances of praise poetry functioned as an important part of court culture and, particularly in Hákon’s reign, political propaganda. As such, like modern slam there must have been a strong element of competition for royal favours among these court skálds. There are thus good reasons to consider what the function and effect of these poetic performances must have been, and question how professional skaldic poets, like slam poets, used live performance as a means to distinguish themselves from other skálds.

As will be noted in more detail in Chapter 1, the performance of pre-Christian skaldic verse has received comparatively little attention in recent Old Norse scholarship, despite oral recitation or ‘spoken-word’ having been the dominant mode of verse transmission in pre-literate Scandinavian society. Skaldic ‘oral’ poetry appears to have been one of the most popular forms of poetry in Norway and Iceland from the late-ninth to early-fourteenth century. Since most scholars seem to agree, if somewhat cautiously, that ‘all medieval

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5 We know that skálds were active in kings’ courts due to a wealth of written sources such as the Icelandic sagas (especially the Konungssonur and Íslendingasögur) and the medieval list skáldatal (‘tally of poets’) in the thirteenth-century Icelandic manuscript Codex Uppsaliensis. For further discussion see, for example, N ordinal, G., Tools of Literacy: The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries (Toronto, 2001) or see below (Chapter 1.1-1.9 and Chapter 3.4-3.7).

6 Whilst there is evidence of female skálds composing poetry in the pre-Christian era, the majority of strophes that we have preserved are usually attributed to male poets. Although it seems reasonable to argue that women may have been lively poets and performers, the poems that I discuss in this thesis are all attributed to male skálds. For the sake of ease I will therefore use the pronoun ‘he’ when referring to the skaldic performer. For more information regarding female skálds, however, see: Ballif Straubhaar, S., Old Norse Women’s Poetry: the Voices of Female Skalds (Cambridge, 2011).

7 Spoken word is a popular modern term used to describe performance poetry, whether slam or otherwise. Spoken word poetry is composed with the intention of live performance, and is therefore always performed. For example, see The Guardian’s own spoken word section online at The Guardian, http://www.theguardian.com/culture/spoken-word (viewed 25 November, 2014) or the Roundhouse in London, which hosts spoken word events: http://www.roundhouse.org.uk/about-us/ artistic-programme/spoken-word/ (viewed 25 November, 2014). As argued below (Chapters 2 and 3), the concept of the all-encompassing term spoken word can also be applied to skaldic performance.

Norse poetry is likely to have been first composed and recited orally, it is striking how few of these scholars have examined skaldic verse as a wholly-oral, pre-textual phenomenon.

In fact, the scholarly focus on skaldic poetry so far has been very much rooted in later thirteenth- and fourteenth-century manuscript traditions. As no audio-recordings of skaldic verse exist, scholars are forced to scrutinise the material remains of the poetry – in other words, the physical written text and circumstances in which it has been preserved – and are hesitant to look beyond the page to ‘unwritten’ past performances. Recent studies, for example those by Margaret Clunies Ross (2005) and Guðrún Nordal (2001), have focused on the intellectual and literary role of skaldic verse as a thirteenth-century written phenomenon and crucial scholastic tool in learned thirteenth-century Icelandic literary culture. Other scholars such as Turville-Petre (1976), Frank (1978), Marold (1983) and Gade (1995) have adopted the more traditional philological approach to skaldic verse, paying close attention to elements such as syllable count, metrical variation, poetic diction and syntactic constructions, resulting in many comprehensive, almost scientific classifications of Old Norse metrics and poetics. In addition, literary critics and religious historians have often pursued a more creative examination of the imagery, metaphors and mythological narratives contained within skaldic ‘texts’ by applying various structuralist, ritualistic, comparativist, social-theorist, oral-literary and linguistic perspectives to their analyses. What unites all of these scholars and their diverse methodological approaches to skaldic verse, however, is that they all focus on the physical leftovers (i.e. written text) of skaldic poetry; rather than attempting to excavate the lost performances of these poems, they simply analyse its skeletal remains.

Even when scholars do attempt to think about skaldic verse in terms of its ‘original’ oral function (as opposed to its ‘new’ literary function or written context in deliberately

9 Clunies Ross, A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics, p. 5.
10 See Chapter 1.5-1.9 for further discussion.
11 Clunies Ross, A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics; Nordal, Tools of Literacy.
12 For a more detailed survey of skaldic scholarship, see Chapter 1.5-1.9.
13 For example, compare Margaret Clunies Ross’ structuralist approach to skaldic poetry in her article, ‘An Interpretation of the Myth of Þórr’s Encounter with Geirrœðr and his Daughter’, in Speculum Norroenum: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre, ed. U. Dronke et al. (Odense, 1981), pp. 370-381 with John Hines’ speech-act theory approach to skaldic verse in his article ‘Ekphrasis as Speech-Act’: Ragnarœðr 1 – 7’, Viking and Medieval Scandinavia 3 (Brepols, 2007), 225-244. For further discussion of the various scholarly approaches to skaldic verse, see Chapters 1.5-1.9.
14 The idea of conducting performance ‘archaeology’ on Old Norse poetic texts is an important concept that was both conceived, and is still being developed, by Terry Gunnell. I discuss Gunnell’s idea of performance archaeology more thoroughly in Chapter 1 (and particularly Chapter 1.8).
penned prosimetric saga texts), it still tends to be from the same text-based perspective. Stefanie Würth, for example, has explored the idea of skaldic praise poetry as an oral ‘speech act’ but, due to her understanding of oral ‘performance’ being limited to outdated theories, she fails to treat skaldic verse as anything other than poetry intended for reception through reading (see Chapter 1.7). Kari Ellen Gade has similarly examined the performance of skaldic verse from a textual perspective. Rather than analysing how a particular poem might have been performed in front of a live audience, Gade limits herself to the analysis of saga prose framing skaldic performances in order to demonstrate the evidence and metrical technicalities of skaldic performance, rather than its function and effect as a live ‘event’ (see Chapter 1.9). In fact, the only study to consider skaldic performance from a performance-based perspective is Terry Gunnell’s forthcoming analysis of the two poems Eiríksmál and Hákonarmál, which follows his earlier research into Old Norse drama and the performance of Vǫluspá (see Chapter 1.8).\(^\text{15}\)

The overall result of such scholarly approaches to pre-Christian skaldic verse has been the evolution of an entire field of scholarship dedicated to a wholly-textual, book-bound interpretation of skaldic oral poetry. Although these studies have proved invaluable to many important developments within the field of Old Norse scholarship, they rarely consider skaldic poetry from the viewpoint of live, oral performance for which it was intended and, as a result, these studies are somewhat limited in both focus and scope. Scholarly tradition has thus paved the way for an academic practice in which skaldic poetry is more often than not treated as written poetry (albeit with oral origins). As noted above, given that skaldic poetry is only preserved in a later written form such an approach is to some extent of course understandable. Nonetheless, as Joseph Harris argues, ‘this should not prevent us from exploring the unheard voices of the past, even though we know ourselves inevitably condemned to deal principally with black marks on parchment.’\(^\text{16}\) More importantly, the scholarly persistence in approaching pre-Christian skaldic verse from such a textual, purely word-based perspective is arguably detrimental and potentially dangerous to

\(^{15}\) I discuss a good deal of Terry Gunnell’s Old Norse-related research in more detail in Chapter 1.8. His research has had an important influence upon my own work and, as such, I will often refer to both his methodologies and conclusions throughout this thesis.

\(^{16}\) Harris, J., “Ethnopaleography” and Recovered Performance: the Problematic Witnesses to Eddic Song’, Western Folklore 62 1/2 Models of Performance Epic, Ballad and Song (Winter - Spring, 2003), 97.
our understanding not only of the form and function of skaldic poetry, but to the hugely important social, political and possibly even religious role that skaldic performance played amongst pre-literate Scandinavian societies. By scrutinising and examining pre-Christian, orally-performed skaldic verse from every angle other than its original and intended mode of presentation – performance – Old Norse scholarship with its current methodologies has inadvertently reduced early skaldic ‘performance poetry’ to silent ‘page poetry’, something that has crucial consequences for our modern understanding of this once wholly-oral phenomenon.

In fact, it is absolutely crucial to have at the forefront of our minds that the earliest skaldic verse was never composed by the pen nor was it ever intended to be read as silent page-poetry. Instead, as Clunies Ross reminds us (as noted above), *skálds* were composing in a pre-literate, oral environment with the intention of performing their poetry in front of a live, physically present audience, even when they inscribed their poems in runes (see Chapters 2.6 and 3.4). That *skálds* wanted attention to be paid to their performance skills can be seen in the fact that, unlike the anonymous eddic tradition, much of the pre-Christian skaldic verse preserved today is attributed to named *skálds* whose oral poems later found their way into learned medieval works such as the *Konungasǫgur* (‘Kings’ sagas’), *Snorra Edda* and the Third Grammatical Treatise. Those professional *skálds* deemed important enough came to be listed in the medieval list known as *skáldatal* (‘tally of poets’), which recorded the names of certain court poets and their patrons. Both the skaldic poetry that is preserved and the prose text surrounding it makes clear that the earliest known *skálds* prided themselves on their originality and artistic flair, and were keen that their poetry should not only engage their audience’s interest and be remembered (and...

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17 Clunies Ross argues that we should do away with the dichotomy between skaldic and eddic poetry, as there is too much overlap and boundary-crossing between the two so-called ‘genres.’ Whilst I agree that there are many examples of verses that do not fit neatly into a ‘skaldic’ or ‘eddic’ category, I use the term ‘skaldic’ loosely to refer to traditional scholarly definitions of ‘skaldic’ verse. As such, ‘skaldic’ here refers to the kenning-rich, riddling and cryptic verses composed by named *skálds* usually (but not always) in *dróttkvætt* metre. In doing so, I hope to distinguish ‘skaldic’ poetry from the distinct set of anonymous, metrically-simpler mythological and heroic poems preserved mainly in the Codex Regius, which scholars refer to as ‘eddic.’ For further discussion, see Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics*, pp. 2-24.

18 *Skáldatal* is found in *Codex Upsaliensis* (c.1200-1225) and the *Kringla* manuscript of *Heimskringla* (c.1258-64). *Skáldatal* is a medieval written list of court poets and their patrons that begins with the ninth-century Norwegian *skáld* Bragi Boddasson and ends in the twelfth-century. For further discussion, see: Nordal, *Tools of Literacy*, pp. 77-9, 121 and 128-9.
presumably, re-performed), but also that it should bear their own unique creative stamp whilst keeping within the bounds of poetic tradition.\(^\text{19}\)

In order to keep their orally-performed poetry individual, original, artistic and fresh, \textit{skálds} would thus have applied certain skills and techniques that extended beyond the literal ‘words’ or ‘verbal text’ of a poem. Furthermore like modern slam poetry, a court \textit{skáld}'s poetic performance would usually have formed part of a complex social ‘event’ or occasion, be it the presentation of a praise poem for a courtly patron, a humorous jibe at a neighbour, or a wooing attempt by a star-crossed lover. In many instances, such as those performances that took place at the courts of King Haraldr and Jarl Hákon, each performance ‘event’ would have provided the \textit{skáld} with an opportunity to showcase his artistic talent, to provide entertainment and to prove his wit, thus placing particular value on the multi-dimensional art-form of live poetry itself. At the same time, such public poetic performance (like any other deliberate artistic performance) in front of any large gathering (such as a legal assembly or wedding feast) would have provided an effective arena for transmitting new ideas or solidify traditional political, cultural or religious ideology, as many rulers were aware (see Chapters 3 and 4).

As noted above, poetic performance always involves much more than the literal meaning or the sounded articulation of words. Poetry composed with the intention of live delivery, whether twenty-first century slam or pre-Christian skaldic verse, is not simply what the poetry scholar Charles Bernstein refers to as an ‘audiotext’ – the physical voicing of a text – as might be encountered at a modern poetry reading or recital.\(^\text{20}\) In fact, performance encompasses a whole range of non-verbal, extra-lexical elements that are not encoded in the physical written text: a performer’s grin, a nod of the head, the smell of the room, forgotten lines, bodily noises, the mood of the audience, a comic aside, and the performance’s social, cultural, political performance contexts. More importantly, it is the performer – and not the ‘text’– that tends to be at the centre of an orally-delivered poem. Watching any live slam or spoken-word performance makes it instantly clear that the performer uses both vocal and visual techniques to breathe life into a poem and give it


meaning. What is more, by putting the act of speaking ‘on display’ and stepping out of the role of ‘ordinary person’ and into the role of ‘performer’ observed by an audience, the performer creates a clearly marked-out performance ‘space’ or ‘secondary sphere’ that is viewed as being separate from everyday reality. Within this space, an audience-performer relationship is established and various key aspects of performance – such as ‘ritual’, ‘play’, and the ‘shared game’ – are called into play, blurring the boundaries as the audience not only listen to a performer, but become active participants as they are invited to enter into the space of the poem itself (see Chapter 3).

These ‘unwritten aspects’ of oral poetry, as the oral scholar John Miles Foley calls them, are fundamental not only to an oral poem’s meaning and success: they also define a poem’s very being and existence. It might thus be argued that in live performance, the ‘words’ themselves play a comparatively minor role in what is actually going on in the performance ‘event’ as a whole. As suggested above, a performance is thus all about the ‘here and now’, about immediacy, about sound and space, atmosphere and audience, all of which are lost when a poem is written down: as Peter Middleton puts it, ‘live poetry readings are clearly bounded in space and time. Miss a line and it is gone; there is no rewind.’ It might thus be argued that all that remains of pre-Christian skaldic verse today is the ghostly remnants of earlier performances, living a liminal half-life as lingering written texts. Viewing oral verse solely through the lens of literature will arguably always give a distorted picture of the once orally-performed skaldic verse as it existed, functioned and was conceived of in its ‘original’ oral mode: as noted above, all that the manuscripts represent are the skeleton of a poem, its bare bones, stripped of its rich performative flesh. As Foley notes, many of the poem’s unwritten aspects – the smell of the room, crackle of the fire, the noise of audience laughter – are lost.

At the same time, it might be argued that treating skaldic verse as written poetry transforms its basic nature: it fossilises the poem, fixes it to the page and reduces it to a

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21 See, for example, one of Britain’s best-known performance poets Benjamin Zephaniah perform Talking Turkeys, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4AgPSjzXkw (viewed 25 November, 2014).
22 These are some of the basic elements of performance as outlined by Richard Baumann and Richard Schechner in their analyses of verbal art and performance. I will elaborate on all of these elements, particularly ritual, play and the shared game, in much more detail in Chapter 3.
23 Foley, How to Read an Oral Poem, pp. 59-63.
25 Foley, How to Read an Oral Poem, p. 60.
silent, static textual artefact. Even though the original skaldic performance has been lost underneath the pages of manuscripts, if we wish to examine and understand these works as they were originally conceived (i.e. live performance), it would seem necessary to at least bear in mind the ways in which they originally functioned in a living context, even if this involves some informed guesswork. After all, hypothesising about how a poet intended his poem to be performed is surely just as valid as the scholarly practice of guessing what a skáld’s metaphors meant, choosing which manuscript variant to use and standardising skaldic orthography to suit our own scholarly expectations.

Based on the premises noted above, the aim of this dissertation is first and foremost to attempt to respond to the question of how we can analyse a pre-Christian skaldic ‘performance’ event that no longer exists? By adopting an entirely new methodology for dealing with skaldic verse, this thesis will approach pre-Christian skaldic poetry from the perspective of Performance Studies, a fresh and innovating academic field developed in the 1990s by the likes of Richard Schechner and Richard Baumann. This Performance Studies approach will be combined with elements developed in recent oral theory – particularly by the likes of John Miles Foley (2002) – along with modern poetic theory, making use of Julia Novak’s *Live Poetry* (2001) and also Charles Bernstein’s *Close Listening* (1998) in particular. With these theoretical frameworks in mind, I mean to conduct what Terry Gunnell has called *performance archaeology* on the material remains (that is the ‘written texts’) of pre-Christian skaldic verse. In doing so, this thesis will not only explore the value of analysing skaldic poetry from a performance-based perspective, but also seek to discover how skaldic poetry functioned as live performance and what effects this might have had in the pre-Christian period, when the poems’ ‘pagan’ content was closely intertwined with religious practice and belief. This approach might be said to go against the grain of most Old Norse scholarship both past and present since it attempts to treat skaldic ‘texts’ from a non-textual perspective. Nevertheless, in doing so I hope that this discussion will bring to light new ideas and offer fresh understanding not only of skaldic verse but also of how it ‘worked’ in its ‘original’ oral-performance mode.

The thesis will begin by giving a brief overview of the characteristics of skaldic poetry whilst offering a review of scholarly attitudes and approaches towards skaldic poetry, both past and present. In Chapter 2, I will begin by asking what is a poem, what makes an oral or ‘performance’ poem different from a written poem and, more importantly, should skaldic poetry be treated predominantly as performance poetry? The conclusions drawn from this section will hopefully demonstrate how a Performance Studies approach can contribute to our scholarly understanding of pre-Christian skaldic verse as ‘performance’. Finally, in Chapters 3 and 4, I will conduct a more performance-orientated analysis of a selection of ninth- and tenth-century skaldic ‘poems’ and the performance process that existed around them, finishing with a particular focus on the performances in Jarl Hákon’s court. By adopting a methodology informed by performance theory, I hope to demonstrate that not only is it possible to analyse a performance that no longer exists, but that it is also possible to use performance as an effective means of analysing the function and effect of skaldic performance in pre-Christian Scandinavian society.
1.1. What is Skaldic Poetry?

Skaldic poetry appears to have been the dominant poetic mode in Norway and Iceland during the late-ninth to early-fourteenth centuries.\(^\text{29}\) Composed before, during and after the conversion to Christianity (c. 999/1000 AD), skaldic poetry enjoyed a mixed oral-literary transmission as both live performance and (after the advent of writing in the early eleventh-century) written page-poetry.\(^\text{30}\) Although over 5,000 verses are preserved in around 500 manuscripts dating mainly from twelfth- to fourteenth-century Iceland, no contemporary evidence remains of skaldic verse during its earlier oral stages: records, tapes, camcorders and digital media were sadly not at the disposal of ninth- and tenth-century skálðs.\(^\text{31}\) Instead, skaldic verse is preserved in a variety of historical, literary and learned prosimetric texts from medieval Iceland, in which it takes the form of fragmentary ‘loose verses’

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(lausavísur) or longer poems (such as drápur). There is little question that the skaldic poetry composed before the onset of literacy in Iceland was not designed for the context in which it is now preserved: what once existed as multiple live, one-off performance events has been fossilised forever in a drastically different literary written form. Although the term ‘skaldic poetry’ technically includes poetry penned by later Christian poets in twelfth- to fourteenth-century Iceland, the focus of this dissertation will mainly be on the multi-faceted oral ninth- and tenth-century skaldic poems composed by illiterate pagan or ‘pre-Christian’ skálds. By ‘pre-Christian skálds’ I am referring to named poets who were composing before the official conversion to Christianity, men who not only had a background in a world of Old Nordic pagan belief, but who also grew up and were operating in a wholly-oral environment filled with poems and stories of gods, giants and other supernatural beings.32

1.2. Form and Function

‘Skaldic’ poetry is the term used by scholars as a means of distinguishing it from ‘eddic’ poetry, the latter of which usually refers to the group of mythological and heroic poems preserved mainly in the two thirteenth-century manuscripts Codex Regius and AM 748 4to.33 Eddic poetry, which employs simpler Germanic metres such as fornyrðislag (‘old story metre’), málaháttr (‘speech metre’), ljóðaháttr (‘chant’ or ‘song metre’) and galdralag (‘spell metre’), is anonymous poetry that deals with events that take place in mythological or pre-historic heroic times.34 Skaldic poetry, on the other hand, tended to be composed by

32 I use the term pre-Christian here to refer to the time before the ‘official’ conversion of Iceland and Norway to Christianity. I am fully aware that the conversion of Scandinavia was a gradual process of syncretism and assimilation both well before and well after the official conversion ‘moment’ described by saga-writers, and certainly accept that Christian or Christian-influenced currents of thought were circulating around Norway and Iceland during the time of what I call ‘pre-Christian’ verse. Nevertheless, I feel that this label is useful as a general term, not least as a means of differentiating this poetry from verses composed in a different cultural and social milieu, such as Christian (and later literate) Iceland. For more information on the conversion of Scandinavia, and the complex relationship between pre-Christian and Christian beliefs, see, for example, the recent collection of articles in Carver, M., ed. The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300 - 1300 (Woodbridge, 2006); and Orri Vésteinsson, The Christianization of Iceland: Priests, Power, and Social Change 1000-1300 (Oxford, 2000).

33 For an analysis of and introduction to eddic poetry see, for example, Gunnell, T., ‘Eddic Poetry’, in A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture, pp. 82-100 and Gunnell, T., ‘The Performance of the Poetic Edda’, in The Viking World, pp. 299-203.

34 Fornyrðislag (‘old story metre’) is the most common form of narrative metre in eddic (and particularly heroic) poems. Like Old English alliterative verse, each strophe consists of four lines (each line divided into two half-lines), with two stresses and one alliterating syllable in every line. The metre málaháttr (‘speech metre’) is similar to fornyrðislag except that the line is lengthened (five stresses instead of four) so that it sounds somewhat closer to speech. Ljóðaháttr (‘song metre’) is often used in wisdom and dialogue poetry, and is made up of one long line (two alliterating syllables, four stresses) and one shorter line (two alliterating syllables, two
named skálds and uses more complex metres whilst mostly focusing on ‘real’ historical people and events. Although the division between skaldic and eddic poetry has been criticised by scholars such as Margaret Clunies Ross, for the purpose of this dissertation I shall continue to use the term ‘skaldic’ more generally to apply to poetry composed and performed by named skálds before the eleventh-century. As noted above, the majority of skaldic poetry is notoriously complex, over 5/6 of extant skaldic verse being composed in the elaborate metre dróttkvætt (‘court metre’). Dróttkvætt is characterised by a strict system of syllable counting, internal rhyme (hendingar) and alliteration in addition to riddling syntax and famously cryptic kenningar, ensuring that both the medieval listening audience and modern readers are thoroughly challenged when trying to unravel a skáld’s veiled, often deliberately ambiguous, meaning. The acoustic experience of dróttkvætt coupled with the cognitive demands placed on the listener suggests that medieval audiences must have distinguished, to some extent, an aural difference between the simpler mythological-heroic ‘eddic’ poetry and the more complicated ‘skaldic’ verse. Keeping a scholarly division between the two thus remains a useful, though by no means fixed, distinction, not least when considering the field of performance.

In terms of content, a popular theme in dróttkvætt compositions was praise addressed to a rich patron, such as a Norwegian king or Icelandic chieftain. Highly conventional and somewhat predictable in terms of subject matter and style, a typical praise poem offered an inflated account of a patron’s bravery, heroic exploits or unceasing generosity towards his subjects. This type of poetry usually took the form of the highly elaborate drápur, a lengthy poem composed with a stef (‘refrain’), which was regarded as

35 See Introduction (footnote 17) for discussion regarding the use of ‘skaldic’ as a term.
37 Skaldic poetry can sometimes be so cryptic that it is almost riddle-like. John Lindow, for example, has analysed the connection between skaldic poetry (in particular kenningar) and riddles. See: Lindow, J., ‘Riddles, Kennings, and the Complexity of Skaldic Poetry’, Scandinavian Studies (1975), 311-327.
the most prestigious poetic form of skaldic verse.\(^39\) A similar, but less impressive, form of skaldic praise poetry was known as a *flokkr* (‘group of poems’), which was often characterised by its lack of refrain.\(^40\) In addition to fashioning poetic praise, however, *skálds* could also compose *erfikvæði* (‘funeral poems’) as well as genealogical poems and ekphrastic ‘shield poetry’, all of which offered similar panegyric themes promoting, to varying degrees, their patron’s shining reputation (see Chapter 3). A significant amount of skaldic praise would thus have been linked to an actual person or ‘recent’ event, giving the verses a real historical context that listeners would most likely have been familiar with.

It is thus clear that skaldic poetry, connected as it was to real historical poets and patrons, played an important social function in pre-Christian Norway and Iceland.\(^41\) As noted above, the medieval tally of poets *skáldatal* records the names of court poets attached to specific Norwegian kings or Icelandic chieftains from the ninth- to twelfth-centuries, suggesting that the *skáld* often enjoyed a position of wealth and prestige in addition to important social responsibility (not least outside Iceland).\(^42\) When the *skáld* composed flattering praise for his patron, he would also expect payment and courtly favour in return. On the other hand, a bad or ‘mocking’ praise poem (like a modern newspaper cartoon or YouTube clip) could destroy a king’s reputation and in turn cost the *skáld* his head.\(^43\) The more common pattern of praise-and-payment is a formula that runs throughout saga narratives, suggesting that skaldic court performance functioned as an important social ritual between poet and patron.\(^44\) Having the power to make or break a patron’s reputation and a *skáld*’s poetic career, skaldic praise (not least in its early oral stages) thus functioned


\(^41\) The social role of skaldic poetry, in addition to that of the *skálds* themselves, has received a lot of scholarly attention despite the somewhat limited evidence. For an analysis of scholarly approaches and a select bibliography regarding these aspects, see, for example, Frank, *‘Skaldic Poetry’*, pp. 180-181 and see below (Chapters 1.5-1.9).

\(^42\) Nordal, *Tools of Literacy*, pp. 117-128.

\(^43\) In his introduction to *Ynglinga saga*, Snorri Sturluson claims: *En þat er háttir skálda at lofa þann me þest, er þá eru þeir fyrir, en engi myndi þat þora at segja sjálfram honum þau verk hans, er allir þeir, er heyrði, vissi, at hégómi veri ok skrók, ok svi sjálfr hann. Pat veri þá háð, en eigi lóf.* (*Heimskringla I*, ed. Bjarni Ásbjarnarson (Reykjavík, 1941)), p. 4. The English translation reads: ‘It is [to be sure] the habit of poets to give highest praise to those princes in whose presence they are; but no one would have dared to tell them to their faces about deeds which all who listened, as well as the prince himself, knew were only falsehoods and fabrications. That would have been mockery, still not praise,’ (Hollander, L. M., *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*, (Austin, 1964)), p. 4. Such mockery was illegal in medieval Norway and Iceland. Examples such as the saga accounts of Egill’s níðstǫng and his poem *Höfðlausn* (*head ransom*) demonstrate the real dangers posed to *skálds* who threatened royal power. See: Whaley, ‘*Skaldic Poetry*’, p. 483.

\(^44\) According to the Performance Studies theorist Richard Schechner, the two elements of ‘ritual’ and ‘play’ are defining features of performance. This is something that I will discuss more thoroughly in Chapter 3.
not only as entertaining verbal art but also as a powerful, and potentially dangerous, social tool.

Skaldic poetry was not, however, limited to royal courts. In addition to recounting the performance of praise in Norwegian, Danish and English courts, the Icelandic sagas frequently depict skaldic verse as also having been an important part of everyday life, spoken by farmers and tradesmen as much as it was performed by professional court skálds.\textsuperscript{45} Rather than reciting lengthy praise poems, however, many of these other poets described in the sagas are shown uttering spontaneous outbursts of shorter detached verses known as lausavísur (‘loose-verses’), which have their own performance contexts. Although these verses can vary in subject and theme, the amorous love-poetry (mansǫngr) and slanderous verse (níðvísur) which several saga characters recite are especially interesting, not least because both were illegal, and subsequently banned, according to Scandinavian law-codes: something which suggests that they were seen as having social, if not almost supernatural, power.\textsuperscript{46} The illocutionary force of these less formal poetic utterances was evidently powerful in Scandinavian society; they are often depicted as leading to social tension and tricky situations that demand a legal response. In Ari Þorgilsson’s history of Iceland (known as Íslendingabók), for example, Hjalti Skeggjasson composes níð against the goddess Freyja and he is outlawed as a result.\textsuperscript{47} Like skaldic praise poems, these socially-explosive love poems and slanderous verses were often composed in slightly simpler metrical variants of dróttkvætt (and different metres altogether) and tend to employ less ornamental language. Whether a skaldic verse was composed in praise or blame, love or insult, however, it should again be remembered that it was often the act of uttering these verses aloud and the effectiveness of the speaker’s performance that had most power and evoked most social consequences in Scandinavian society, rather than simply ‘what’ was said.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{45} For discussions surrounding the role of skaldic verse in saga narrative see, for example: O’Donoghue, \textit{Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative} and Poole, R., \textit{Viking Poems on War and Peace: A Study in Skaldic Narrative}, Toronto Medieval Texts and Translations Book 8 (Toronto, 1991).

\textsuperscript{46} Nordal, \textit{Tools of Literacy}, pp. 77-79.


\textsuperscript{48} The importance of poetic utterance as speech act was clearly an important aspect of skaldic verse: see, for example, Würth, S., ‘Skaldic Verse and Performance’, in \textit{Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World}, ed. J. Quinn, T. Wills and K. Heslop (Turnhout, 2007), pp. 240-262 and Clunies Ross, \textit{A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics}, pp. 14-19.
Despite the apparent popularity of skaldic verse (according to the sagas), it remains uncertain whether such complicated poetry was enjoyed by a general audience or whether it belonged to a particular social group. The term ‘dróttkvætt’ ('court metre') itself implies that skaldic verse composed in this metre was tailored specifically towards a court environment. Given the metrical intricacies and complex kenning system which dróttkvætt employed, it certainly seems possible that dróttkvætt functioned as 'a kind of secret language' that was only accessible to those initiated in kenning-craft and enigmatic word play.\footnote{Lindow, ‘Riddles, Kenning and the Complexity of Skaldic Poetry’, p. 323. In a conversation between the giant Ægir and the euhermised skáld Bragi, Snorri describes how: vör felum í rúnum eða í skáldskap svá at vör köllum þat mál eða orðak, tal þessa jóna. (Skáldskaparmál, ed. Faulkes, p. 5). The English translation reads: ‘We conceal it (i.e. the expression, the myth) it in secret language or in poetry by calling it speech or words or talk of these giants,’ (Edda, trans. A. Faulkes, p. 61).}

In connection to this, it might be borne in mind that the thirteenth-century Icelandic scholar Snorri Sturluson felt the need to write an entire handbook about the language and metre of skaldic poetry, including the sections Skáldskaparmál ('the language of poetry') and Háttatal ('tally of metres'), as a means of training young skálds in the technical art of skaldic composition.\footnote{Scholars usually group Skáldskaparmál and Háttatal together with Snorri’s Prologue and Gylfaginning under the title of Snorra Edda ('Snorri’s Edda'), which was thought to be written by Snorri Sturluson c. 1220 but now only exists in later manuscripts. See: Edda: Snorri Sturluson, trans. A. Faulkes (London, 1995) for further discussion and a full bibliography.} Clearly, skaldic verse was not something that just anyone could compose: it demanded extensive mythological knowledge, a technical understanding of metrics, an ear for alliteration and quick-witted, resourceful ingenuity.

Snorri outlines the rules for dróttkvætt in Háttatal, using different examples of skaldic poetry to illustrate the various metrical requirements of skaldic verse. According to Snorri, the dróttkvætt stanza consisted of eight lines divided into two helmingar (four lines), with six syllables (or three stresses) per line. All lines contained internal rhyme, with even lines possessing aðalhendingar ('full-rhyme' or 'assonance'), whilst odd lines contained skothendingar ('shot-rhyme' or 'half-rhyme'). All lines were held together by alliteration (samstofur), with two alliterating stresses in odd lines known as stuðlar ('props') and one main alliteration in even lines known as hofuðstofr ('head-stave').\footnote{Háttatal (ed. Faulkes, pp. 3-5). For a full modern English translation of Snorri’s account, see: Edda, trans. Faulkes, pp. 165-168.} A typical dróttkvætt stanza is as follows:

\begin{quote}
Lætr sár Hákun heitir
(hann rekkir lið) bannat
\end{quote}
Despite Snorri’s prescriptive, rule-bound approach to skaldic verse, it nevertheless appears that skálds could enjoy some degree of flexibility in skaldic composition. In fact, Snorri presents over one hundred different skaldic metres, including metrical variants of dróttkvætt, which suggests that skálds were not restricted to one fixed model of skaldic verse but could vary such features as rhyme-scheme, syllable count or placement of alliteration to suit their own compositional needs. These features alone reflect the respect for individuality and creation.

In terms of language, a skáld also needed a large vocabulary at his disposal in order to fulfil the metrical requirements that skaldic poetry demanded. More importantly, a skáld often needed to demonstrate his own artistic merits by weaving together clever allusions or challenging the listener with word play. As such, the dominant mode of expression that characterises skaldic poetry is the kenningar, a periphrastic noun phrase or circumlocution that offered the poet an opportunity to conceal literal meaning behind layers of mythological references. Using Old Norse mythology as a structural framework to aid his lexical and semantic choice, the skáld crafted his kenning by using a base-word and a

53 Snorra Edda and the man supposedly behind its composition, the thirteenth-century Snorri Sturluson, are worth an entire thesis in itself. Indeed, considerable ink has been spilt by scholars debating Snorri’s attitude and agenda, his methodology and the nature of his sources. As such, I will not spend time discussing arguments that have been dealt with in much greater deal elsewhere. Instead, I will refer the reader to works such as Nordal, Tools of Literacy, and Clunies Ross, A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics.
determinant, which in turn formed a referent.\textsuperscript{54} In the kenning \textit{Míms vinr}, for example, the word \textit{vinr} (‘friend’) is the base-word and \textit{Míms} (‘of Mímir’) is the determinant. When combined, these two nouns produce the referent ‘Óðinn’. In modern editions of skaldic poetry, a kenning is indicated using the following orthographic convention: \textit{Míms vinr} [‘friend of Mímir’ > Óðinn].\textsuperscript{55}

The use of \textit{heiti} (‘poetic synonyms’) was also crucial to skálds who wanted to put their own creative artistic ‘spin’ on \textit{kenningar} constructions.\textsuperscript{56} By substituting one word for another (that is, using \textit{heiti}), a skáld could make sure that his ‘kenning’ was made up of different words (and thus acoustic sounds) than a kenning with the same meaning (or ‘referent’) composed by another skáld. Instead of \textit{Míms vinr} [>Óðinn], for example, a poet might say \textit{úlfs of bági} [‘adversary of the wolf’ > Óðinn] which still produces the referent ‘Óðinn’ but uses different words and sound patterns – with different semantic connotations – to the kenning \textit{Míms vinr} entirely.\textsuperscript{57} According to Snorri, a particularly adroit skáld would often vary these basic ingredients to put their own stamp on what was often highly formulaic verse by extending the metaphor within a kenning (\textit{nýgjǫrvingar}),\textsuperscript{58} engaging in quick-witted antithesis (\textit{refhvǫrj})\textsuperscript{59} or much-loved word-play (\textit{ólfjóst}).\textsuperscript{60} At the same time, slight adjustments in rhyme scheme could produce a whole host of \textit{dróttkvætt} variants such as \textit{dunhenda} (‘echoing rhyme’),\textsuperscript{61} \textit{tvískelft} (‘double-shaken’),\textsuperscript{62} and \textit{ridhendur} (‘rocking rhymes’).\textsuperscript{63}

According to Snorri, a skáld’s skill could thus be said to reside in his verbal dexterity, his wit and his ability to compose a beautifully crafted, metrically smooth and highly ornate poem decorated with elaborate \textit{kenningar} and not least acoustic sound. Nevertheless, there

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{54} Turville-Petre. \textit{Scaldic Poetry}, pp. xlv-lix; Nordal, \textit{Tools of Literacy}, pp. 5-6.
\item \textsuperscript{55} \textit{Skáldskaparmál} (ed. Faulkes, p. 9, v. 15).
\item \textsuperscript{56} A \textit{heiti} was a poetic appellation, a synonym that could be used to substitute one word for another. This was important in skaldic verse as, given skaldic poetry’s strict metrical requirements, a skáld would need to find words that fitted both the rhyme-scheme and rhythm. As such, a skáld would have needed a large vocabulary, an idea that is arguably supported by the appearance of \textit{þulur} in medieval texts. Essentially, \textit{þulur} were long lists or ‘catalogues’ of poetic appellations (\textit{heiti}) which has led scholars such as Guðrún Nordal to argue that these lists were important for the skálds’ memory training. As Nordal argues, ‘The þulur could be fixed in the memory and used for reference during composition.’ For further discussion, see: Nordal, \textit{Tools of Literacy}, p.5.
\item \textsuperscript{57} \textit{Skáldskaparmál} (ed. Faulkes, p. 9, v. 16). It is interesting to note that the Old Norse word \textit{bági} (‘adversary’) also means ‘poet.’
\item \textsuperscript{58} \textit{Háttatal} (ed. Faulkes, p. 6).
\item \textsuperscript{59} \textit{Háttatal} (ed. Faulkes, p. 11).
\item \textsuperscript{60} \textit{Skáldskaparmál} (ed. Faulkes, p. 109).
\item \textsuperscript{61} \textit{Háttatal} (ed. Faulkes, p. 15). See also: \textit{Edda} (trans. Faulkes, p. 182).
\item \textsuperscript{62} \textit{Háttatal} (ed. Faulkes, p. 16). See also: \textit{Edda} (trans. Faulkes, p. 184).
\item \textsuperscript{63} \textit{Háttatal} (ed. Faulkes, p. 17). See also: \textit{Edda} (trans. Faulkes, p. 186).
\end{itemize}
are many examples of skaldic poetry, composed in both dróttkvætt and other metres, which do not point to high artistic skill and, in some instances, actually seem hurried and crudely put together (see Chapter 2.3). This suggests that despite Snorri’s prescriptive, rule-bound approach to skaldic poetry, not all skaldic verse was composed with the intention of being a polished performance piece: many compositions seem to have occurred on the spot with little preparation, often the result of verbal challenges, competitive games or simply as a kind of emotional outlet for a saga character (see Chapter 3.5). Whether an elegant praise poem or fast-paced piece of skaldic improvisation, it seems unlikely that, although there seem to have been no restrictions in place to stop those untrained in the skaldic art from attempting to create their own skaldic verses, such metrically and metaphorically complex ‘high art’ was not something that everyone and anyone composed. In short, it seems that the court skáld was viewed as no ordinary figure, but a skilled creator and supernaturally-gifted performer (see Chapter 2.7) with access to a wealth of mythological knowledge and intricate understanding of poetic metrics. It is therefore interesting that certain skálds and their audiences felt the need to preserve these cryptic, mythologically-rich ‘pagan’ verses and pass them down through different social, political, religious and even geographical contexts. This therefore begs the question: why preserve skaldic verse at all? And who preserved it?

1.3. Preservation Context

As noted above (see Chapter 1.1), most pre-Christian skaldic verses are preserved in prosimetric texts written during a time when medieval Iceland had become a hub of book-production and literary activity. As Icelanders began to write down their history, laws and narrative traditions, it seems that they frequently turned to skaldic poetry as important sources of historical evidence to verify the information in their prose accounts. They also used eddic and skaldic poetry as a form of evidence concerning pre-Christian ideas and beliefs. Snorri Sturluson’s Edda, for example, is an invaluable source of pre-Christian skaldic poetry. Not only does Snorri quote early skálds extensively as proof of pre-Christian mythological knowledge and belief, he also uses the skálds’ verses to inform and instruct his medieval audience on the intricacies of skaldic language and metrics by means of practical

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64 For a useful summary of the transition from an oral to literate society in Iceland, including the role of poetry during this process, see: Quinn, ‘From Orality to Literacy in Medieval Iceland’, pp. 30-60.
demonstration. Snorri’s Skáldskaparmál (‘the language of poetry’) is a gold-mine of early skaldic verse, much of which is not preserved elsewhere, suggesting that many, if not all, of Snorri’s poetic sources must have been oral (in other words, passed on by means of sound rather than writing).

Similarly, historical works such as Heimskringla, Ágrip and various other Konungarsögur (‘sagas of kings’) all quote pre-Christian praise poems as historical documents in a bid to authenticate their narrative. In the more literary-orientated Íslendingarsögur (‘sagas of Icelanders’), on the other hand, skaldic verse more often takes the form of spontaneous outbursts usually employed as a means of embellishing the narrative or aiding characterisation. As a result, what was once a living tradition of live skaldic performance has thus taken the form of fragmented verses scattered across a variety of literary, historical and theoretical Icelandic texts assembled by saga authors. What is more, one must remember that these saga authors were not simply ‘transcribing’ the oral tradition in an objective manner: instead, they carefully selected and utilised certain verses from a wider body of material in order to suit their own literary agenda (which would have been quite different from that of the skálds when they created and presented their work).

The nature of the preservation of pre-Christian verse can thus be said to be potentially problematic for those who wish to study skaldic poetry as it lived, worked and functioned during its earlier oral stages. Placed in a textual environment and given a new literary function by learned medieval writers, it is notoriously difficult to establish the date, authorship or even authenticity of skaldic verse with any certainty. Whilst metrical strictness might have acted as a safe-guard against instability and change during the long transmission process of skaldic verse, there is little question that a skaldic poem would have

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65 Ólafr Þórðarson’s Third Grammatical Treatise also offers a theoretical analysis of skaldic poetry, but most of the poems and verses that Ólafr quotes were composed at a later time. See: Nordal, Tools of Literacy, 199-272.
66 Clunies Ross, A History of Norse Poetry and Poetics, pp. 8-10.
67 The idea put forward by several scholars, most notably Heather O’Donoghue, is that stanzas could be used in saga narrative either as authenticating devices (in historical works) or literary embellishment (in narrative, fictional works) is one that has taken hold of Old Norse scholarship. See: O’Donoghue, Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative.
68 Exceptions here are, of course, the poets’ sagas (skáldsögur) where the main character regularly utters verses as part of his characterisation as a poet.
69 The use of skaldic poetry by saga authors is a huge topic and one that has been discussed a great deal by scholars of Old Norse in recent years. Questions regarding the authenticity of skaldic verses, their date, authorship and why a saga author used, created, misunderstood or possibly omitted a verse comprise an intriguing area of debate. See Chapters 1.3-1.5.
70 Frank, ‘Skaldic Poetry’, offers the best summary of scholarship surrounding the problems of establishing authorship and date of skaldic stanzas. See Chapters 1.4-1.5 for further discussion.
changed in varying degrees any number of times in oral (and also textual) transmission before it attained its extant written form. As noted in Chapter 2.2, no single performance of a poem would ever have been the same, even when it was delivered by the same performer.\(^{71}\) Without direct access to these live skaldic performers and their performances, we must rely on the information provided both by the poems and the literary descriptions of performance from medieval Iceland, in order to inform us of a poem or verse’s ‘performance context.’ In short, we must trust that these poems and their accompanying prose retain at least some memory of past performance traditions (or traditions known in the twelfth- or thirteenth-century). Although many of these prose accounts are useful, however, we must also remain cautious when analysing them as it is sometimes apparent that a saga author has misunderstood a verse, or else entirely fabricated it based on his own interpretation or agenda.\(^{72}\)

As a result, it is crucial that anyone analysing the performance of skaldic poetry remember that pre-Christian skaldic verse is subject to a biased preservation, to the literary distortions of saga authors, and a complicated transmission history. Nevertheless, such problematic preservation should neither limit nor prevent the study of skaldic poetry as oral performance. Indeed, it might be argued that any study of early skaldic poetry that does not consider the elements sound and performance is not considering skaldic poetry as it was understood at the time, but rather a quite different phenomena that would have been unknown to its creators. While we cannot access skaldic performance directly, it is nonetheless possible to get closer to the way it worked and functioned if we examine all the extant information from the viewpoint of those scholarly methodologies and frameworks relating to living performance. This, along with comparative fieldwork into various types of living poetic performance, provides us with a means of attempting to understand how skálds and their poems might have worked and functioned in front of a live, physically-present audience.

\(^{71}\) The theory of live performance and its inevitably transient nature is discussed in more detail below (Chapter 2.2).

\(^{72}\) An example of a saga author misunderstanding a verse is in the anonymous Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum, where the saga author has mistaken the kenning skeiðarbrandr (‘prow of ship’) for a king’s epithet ‘Ship Brandr’. See: Frank, ‘Skaldic Poetry’, p. 170 for a brief analysis of this misunderstanding.
Chapter 1.4. Scholarly Approaches to Skaldic Verse

In her overview of scholarly approaches to skaldic verse (2005), Roberta Frank argues the following:

The history of skaldic scholarship from Snorri down to the great skaldicists of the last fifty years can be seen as a series of attempts to deny the interplay of the three systems at work in the verse: the metrical, lexical, and syntactical; each scholar isolated one level, trying to make its workings seem logical and consistent and its way of ordering the only sound one.\textsuperscript{73}

While this has some validity, what Frank does not mention is that whilst Old Norse scholars are so preoccupied with squabbling over the technicalities of skaldic poetry, they completely fail to consider skaldic poetry for what it actually was: as live performance by a living, breathing skáld needing to make himself heard above the racket of a rowdy mead-hall and audience of critical onlookers. Despite the recent vogue in scholarship to consider Old Norse orality,\textsuperscript{74} the social role of the skáld, and the power of poetry as a ‘speech act’ in early Scandinavian society,\textsuperscript{75} few scholars have closed their eyes and opened their ears to the sound of skaldic poetry as oral poetry. Even fewer scholars have attempted to explore how skaldic poetry might have worked in live, physical performance.\textsuperscript{76} Fear of the unknown combined with the restrictions of accepted scholarly convention and the present-day appearance of skaldic poetry as unchanging literary text printed on a page seems to have prevented most skaldicists from pursuing skaldic performance as their main line of enquiry. As a result, our understanding of early skaldic poetry as it might have been seen from the point of view of both the skáld and the original audience remains severely limited.

\textsuperscript{73} Frank, ‘Skaldic Poetry’, p. 167. Italics my emphasis.

\textsuperscript{74} For example, scholars such as Stephen Mitchell, Joseph Harris, Gíslí Sigurðsson and Judy Quinn (amongst others) have all taken an active interest in Old Norse orality. See Chapter 1.7.

\textsuperscript{75} For example, see: Würth, ‘Skaldic Verse and Performance.’

\textsuperscript{76} A notable exception is Terry Gunnell. See Chapter 1.7-1.8 for further discussion.
1.5. Skaldic Scholarship: post-1970s

In the last forty years or so, however, there has been a noticeable change in scholarly attitudes and approaches towards skaldic poetry. Scholars seem to have become more scrupulous in their approaches, more critical in their analyses, and more measured in their conclusions. Translations of many Old Icelandic texts containing skaldic poetry have also become available in several modern languages, whilst the English language has gradually become the language of choice in scholarly discourse, allowing skaldic scholarship to become more accessible to those who do not speak the German or Scandinavian tongues.

Skaldicists are no longer restricted to white-bearded, pipe-smoking professors, but are found as undergraduates and post-docs in Universities as far afield as the United States, Australia and Israel. Numerous Old Norse conferences are held all over the world and skaldic poetry has often reached the stage of becoming a popular topic of debate: the recent Cambridge Kenning Symposium (2011) even witnessed a whole conference dedicated solely to the examination of skaldic verse.

As part of this growing interest in skaldic poetry, the 1970s produced what might be described as skaldic ‘textbooks’ that are still used today as essential reading by those who are new to the subject. Turville-Petre’s Scaldic Poetry (1976) and Roberta Frank’s Old Norse Court Poetry (1978), for example, provided a more holistic approach to skaldic verse than that given by earlier scholars (see Chapter 1.6), not least in that they offer an accessible overview of skaldic poetry’s form and function, with additional insights being given into its context in Old Norse language, history and culture. Alongside this, one finds larger ‘introductory’ volumes of Old Norse literature now devoting whole chapters to skaldic poetry as a distinct phenomenon although, as noted above, the division between ‘eddic’

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77 For a detailed overview of skaldic scholarship that extends beyond the scope of this thesis, see: Frank, ‘Skaldic Poetry’.
78 At the recent International Saga Conference (Aarhus, 2012), for example, the majority of papers were given in English. The recent translation of the Íslendingasøgur into English was the result of a huge scholarly effort from many world-leading scholars. See: Viðar Hreinsson et. al., ed. The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, including 49 Tales, Viking Age Classics (Reykjavík, 1997). This has been followed up by the ongoing collaborative project known as Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages more commonly referred to as The Skaldic Editing Project, which has produced both online and in printed versions of skaldic verses in Old Norse and English translation (some volumes of which have been published and some of which are still forthcoming. For example (and of particular use to this thesis), see: Whaley, D., ed. Poetry From the Kings’ Sagas: from Mythical Times to c. 1035, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages, Volume 1 (Turnhout, 2012).
79 The Cambridge Kenning Symposium took place 28-29 June 2011 in the Anglo-Saxon, Norse & Celtic Department at the University of Cambridge.
and ‘skaldic’ is still debated. More recently, The Skaldic Database was set up by Dr. Tarrin Wills in 1998 as an interactive online resource housing around 40,000 lines of skaldic poetry edited and translated by a team of world-leading experts. Not only does the database make skaldic poetry available to a wider audience, it also provides a more up-to-date alternative to Finnur Jónsson’s Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning (1912-15) by interlinking the complex manuscript, linguistic and literary traditions of skaldic poetry with information about the verses and the skálds themselves.

Despite this recent growth of academic interest in skaldic poetry, and the growth of interest in the nature of the oral tradition that followed the appearance of Albert Lord’s Singer of Tales (1960), it is noteworthy that skaldic performance has received relatively little attention. Unlike earlier scholars, whose musical and dramatic interpretations of Old Norse poetry were often based more on imaginative reconstruction than scientific objectivity (see Chapter 1.6), modern skaldic scholars have become wary of stepping beyond the printed material that they have in front of them. As Roberta Frank has written, ‘skaldicists today are relatively sceptical about their chances of getting anything right [...] most of the stories and confident assertions in our literary history are now matters of doubt and suspicion.’ As a result of this ‘doubt and suspicion’, most scholars prefer to work with the extant ‘facts’ that face them, reading skaldic poetry as silent, black and white symbols printed on the page rather than ‘listening’ to it as it might have been spoken aloud or experimenting with possible means of presentation. As such, skaldic poetry continues to

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80 Skaldic poetry is, for example, the main focus of Kari Ellen Gade’s chapter, ‘Poetry and its Changing Importance in Medieval Icelandic Culture’, in Old Icelandic Literature and Society, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 61-95. and Whaley, ‘Skaldic Poetry’.
81 For access to the skaldic database, follow the link provide with The Skaldic Database, https://www.abdn.ac.uk/skaldic/db.php (viewed 25 November, 2014).
84 Of course, there are some notable exceptions: scholars such as Lars Lönnroth, Joseph Harris, Stephen Mitchell and Terry Gunnell have all considered, at some point, the orality and ‘liveness’ of skaldic and eddic performance. On the other hand, Gisli Sigurðsson has been highly influential in his analysis of the oral tradition in the Icelandic sagas, seeing them as more than simply written texts. Gisli’s ground-breaking work The Medieval Saga and Oral Tradition (Harvard, 2004) represents a landmark in in saga scholarship, although it is a shame that it took until the turn of the millennium for a scholar to produce such a work. Unlike other saga scholars whose analysis of saga orality is still limited by a narrow text-based perspective, the strength of Gisli’s analysis resides not only in his premise that the Icelandic sagas in their written form were ultimately shaped by orality, but the fact that he wholly embraces the role of oral fieldworker by using examples from living oral cultures. It might be argued that Gisli’s study has redefined saga scholarship, not least because it demonstrates the benefit of looking beyond the book and outside of the Old Norse field of academia. Although Gisli has considered eddic poetry in the light of oral theory (for example Gisli Sigurðsson, ‘On the Classification of Eddic Heroic Poetry in View of the Oral Theory’, in The Seventh International Saga Conference: Poetry in the
be encountered by new generations of scholars in printed form, and continues to be treated as written poetry, even though the accepted ‘fact’ of the matter is that its makers never intended it to be dealt with in such a fashion. The enduring approaches noted above have meant that the analysis of skaldic performance has largely continued to be limited to a textual perspective.

A good example of the way in which recent scholarship tends to analyse skaldic poetry from a literary point of view can be seen in the ways in which modern scholars have dealt with the tenth-century poem Þórsdrápa, apparently composed by Eilífr Goðrúnarson. Margaret Clunies Ross (1981), for instance, focused directly on the text and applied a structuralist methodology to her analysis of Þórr’s encounter with the giant Geirrøðr in Þórsdrápa, concluding that the myth’s central concern revolves around Þórr rejecting the mother figure and managing to control unbridled female sexuality.  

Robertta Frank (1986), on the other hand, concentrated on language examining the images of hand-tools in the same poem, arguing that the skáld Eilífr engages with the language of religious symbolism in a manner similar to that used in the Old English poem Exodus.  

Chris Abrams (2004) in his examination of Hel as a literary topos in Old Norse poetry, applied a linguistic analysis to the words hélblótinn and hérblótinn in the poem as a means of arguing that Eilífr may have envisioned Hel not as a goddess but as a physical location.

These studies demonstrate three very different attitudes and understanding to the skaldic poem Þórsdrápa. Whilst Clunies Ross’ analysis is very much located on the symbolic level of mythological narrative, Frank and Abrams focus on specific motifs (hand-tools and Hel respectively), looking more to the wider religious contexts influencing Eilífr’s lexical and semantic decisions. All three studies have importance, and show expert academic knowledge. It is noteworthy, however, that all three show how skaldic poetry tends to be approached predominantly from a literary, text-based perspective, focussing on language, meaning and ideas, without any regard for how it might have worked in live performance. None of the above scholars pay any attention to the way in which the poem might have

"Scandinavian Middle Ages, Spoleto 1-4 Septembre 1998 (Spoleto, 1990)). It is unfortunate that such a comprehensive study has not been conducted on skaldic poetry.

‘worked’ in living performance, or how it might have communicated these ideas to a living audience.

In general, it might be argued that just as recent scholarship ignores the live, performative dimension to skaldic poetry by treating it as written poetry, it also tends to regard all skaldic verse as being essentially a thirteenth-century textual phenomenon (an approach which is, of course, also often applied to the Icelandic family sagas). Guðrún Nordal’s examination of the use of skaldic poetry in Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda* and Ólafr Þórdarson’s *Third Grammatical Treatise*, for example, underlines its use in thirteenth-century Icelandic pedagogy as local models for the application of Latin *grammatica*.88 Nordal also notes that these Latin models helped preserve ‘pagan’ poetry, as they allowed Icelandic scholars to quote Norse *hófuðskálds* (‘chief skálds’) just as Christian writers had quoted *auctores* (‘authorities’) from pagan Classical texts.89 Judy Quinn (1995) has similarly examined skaldic poetry within the context of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland in which, during a dynamic period of intellectual discourse, poetry underwent a transformation from oral poetry to poetry that was written down, theorised, systematised and analysed using Latin-inspired models.90 In a similar fashion, Margaret Clunies Ross has focused on the tensions and strains reflected in *The Third Grammatical Treatise* as Ólafr Þórdarson attempted to force the native oral tradition into a Latin textual mould, and agrees that skaldic poetry served an essentially educational and instructive role in both Ólaf’s *Treatise* and Snorri’s *Edda*. For logical reasons, all of these studies have concentrated on skaldic poetry as written text, keeping to the form in which it came to be preserved (as a textual tool in thirteenth-century Icelandic scholasticism and learning) rather than its original form and context. In a sense, these are studies of citation rather than original form.

Other studies have taken a similar approach, examining the wholly-textual role that the cited skaldic poetry plays in later saga writing. Heather O’Donoghue (2005), for instance, has argued that in Old Norse historical saga writing such as the *Konungarsögur*, skaldic verse was used as documentary evidence to authenticate prose claims made by the saga author,

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88 Latin *grammatica* not only offered the study of language and grammar, but the interpretation of texts and figurative language. See: Nordal, *Tools of Literacy*.
89 By quoting Old Norse *hófuðskálds* (‘chief poets’), Snorri Sturluson and Ólafr Þórdarson not only preserved a vast amount of skaldic poetry, but also created a canon of select poets that often correspond to those *skálds* named on the medieval list of poets *Skáldatal*. It is thus important to remember that skaldic poetry preserved in theoretical texts from the thirteenth-century is subject to a biased preservation. See: Nordal, *Tools of Literacy*, p. 11.
whereas the spontaneous lausavísur in the Íslendingasögur served predominantly as literary ornaments to embellish the narrative and aid characterisation. Russell Poole (1991), meanwhile, has argued that the lausavísur actually represent short excerpts from longer skaldic poems which were used by the saga authors as a kind of ‘running commentary’ or dramatic monologue in order to create a sense of immediacy for the saga audience, thereby serving an important narrative function in saga literature. On a similar line of thought, Guðrún Nordal (2008) has argued that the addition or omission of verses in the Íslendingasögur was not simply due to chance but to deliberate ‘authorial preference’ that depended on not only the saga author but also his audience’s literary taste (see below). Once again, for logical reasons, none of these studies consider the original oral nature of the work in question, but rather the form in which it has been preserved, and the reasons for its preservation.

Even when scholars do touch the question of the lively oral tradition responsible for keeping skaldic verse alive and transmitting it into thirteenth-century Iceland, this too tends to involve an essentially textual perspective. Guðrún Nordal, for example, has analysed the thirty ‘additional’ verses in the Reykjabók (AM 468 4to) and Kálfalækjarbók (AM 133 fol) manuscripts of Njáls saga, arguing that many of these stanzas were possibly composed after the saga was written. To her mind, these verses were added in order to adapt the material to a more sensitive listening audience, which possibly included children, the additional verses serving, among other things, to soften Gunnarr’s character, and in one particular case, to cleverly conceal Unnr’s allusion to her husband’s penis in a cryptic kenning. Whilst Guðrún’s analysis of the additional verses demonstrate an active interest in the oral transmission of poetry (as part of a prose text) and also the reception of verses by a thirteenth century audience, the approach is still essentially book-bound. Rather than exploring how these verses might have worked during oral performance in a thirteenth-century Christian context, Guðrún, like many other Old Norse scholars, appears more concerned with the impact orality had on the written text rather than the workings of oral performance itself.

91 O’Donoghue, Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative.
92 Poole, Viking Poems on War and Peace.
Recent attitudes and approaches to skaldic poetry over the last forty or so years thus differ dramatically from earlier scholarship. For logical reasons, skaldicists no longer take their source material at face value, as the unchanging, frozen remains of oral (and sometimes ‘pagan’) texts. Although scholars acknowledge that the subject matter contained within Old Norse poetry is usually somewhat older than the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century manuscripts in which it is preserved, recent scholarship nevertheless positions itself in line with more critical, text-bound thinking. Ultimately, for most scholars at least, skaldic poems are viewed from the focus of their extant form: in other words, the poems are viewed as literary products that should be examined as part of medieval context in which they came to be preserved. Even when scholars do actually examine ‘pagan’ skaldic poetry from the viewpoint of its earlier ‘original’ contexts (in the ninth- and tenth-centuries), almost all scholars come back to the fact that despite a skaldic verse’s perceived ‘authenticity’ it must be seen ultimately as the literary product of a thirteenth-century textual culture. It is this wary scholarly mind-set that has effectively set the tone for most modern studies into skaldic performance, which tend to focus on the safely-bound, silent and static written word rather than the living oral forms of the original.

1.6. Early Skaldic Scholarship: The pre-1970s

Early scholarship was arguably more performance-orientated in its approach to skaldic poetry than the majority of scholarship today. In 1786, one of the earliest Old Norse scholars, Jón Ólafsson, argued that skaldic poetry was not only sung or chanted by skálds, but possibly accompanied by musical instruments in a manner that was comparable to that of French troubadours or Anglo-Saxon scops. Similarly, in 1780, the French musicologist Jean Benjamin de Laborde published five strophes of Old Norse poetry with accompanying (written) melodies that he claimed had been sung by medieval Icelanders and passed down orally into the eighteenth century. The strophes that Laborde wrote down represented a mix of genres and styles, taken as they were from the poems Völuspá, Hávamál, the death-song of Ragnarr loðbrókr, a skaldic stanza by King Haraldr harðráði and the skaldic Christian

hymn *Lilja*. Although later scholars questioned whether the tunes that Laborde recorded were actually ‘original’ or instead influenced by Church music, the likes of Hofmann (1963) and Kristján Árnason (1991) still supported the view that skaldic poetry was once sung, and possibly enjoyed musical accompaniment.\(^{97}\)

Over a century after de Laborde and Jón Ólafsson in 1925, Andreas Heusler followed a similar track when he put forward the view that eddic poetry should be read as a musical score, thereby underlining that he saw a connection between Old Norse poetry and musical performance.\(^{98}\) Although he did not believe that skaldic verse was sung, Heusler argued that in eddic verse a written line might be seen as representing two ‘bars’ (musical units of time) so that an eddic poet, already speaking in heavily-alliterated stress patterns, would pronounce the words quickly or slowly depending on the number of syllables in each line.\(^{99}\) Heusler’s music-inspired methodology can be seen as a reaction to the much more textual approach of Finnur Jónsson who, in his influential 1905 edition of the *Poetic Edda*, frequently altered the line-length of eddic verses, eliminated ‘extra’ syllables or changed word order in a bid to ‘improve’ the metre.\(^{100}\)

That eddic and skaldic poetry had a certain musical quality was not lost on the scholar L. M. Hollander (1945) either. In his English translation of selected Old Norse poems, Hollander deliberately sought to recreate the alliterative stresses and acoustic experience of an eddic-skaldic audience.\(^{101}\) In his introduction, Hollander argues that given the specific alliterative stress patterns of eddic poetry, ‘no other verse form will approximate the feel of Old Germanic Poetry’ and, as a result, Hollander concludes ‘in following the oldmetrical

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\(^{98}\) Heusler, A., *Deutsche Versgeschichte mit Einschluss des Altenenglischen und altnordischen Stabreimverses*, Grundriss der germanischen Philologie 8 (Berlin, 1925-29).

\(^{99}\) For example, according to Heusler’s theory, more syllables would demand a quicker pronunciation in order to ensure that they kept within the four-beat (two bar) limitations. Equally, fewer syllables would demand spacing out, possibly by prolonging a word or including a pause by the performer in order to keep within the four-beat limit. For further discussion, see: Jónas Kristjansson, *Eddas and Sagas: Iceland’s Medieval Literature* 3rd ed. trans. P. Foote (Reykjavik, 1997), pp. 33-35.

\(^{100}\) Finnur Jónsson showed a keen awareness of metrics and sound rules (such as alliteration) governing Old Norse verse. In 1892, he published *Stutt íslenskr bragfræði* (‘A Short Icelandic Prosody’) in which he discussed the difference between consonant and vowel sounds, and the possibility for vowel sounds to alliterate with one another. Nevertheless, Finnur’s approach to poetic ‘sound’ was again purely text-based and scholarly: unlike Heusler, who appreciated the musical quality of Old Norse verse, Finnur seems to have viewed alliteration and stress as part of a metrical system to be analysed and picked apart. See: Finnur Jónsson, *Stutt íslenskr bragfræði* (Copenhagen, 1892).

scheme I have preferred a true, rather than smooth, rendering.\textsuperscript{102} For example in strophe 5 of Hollander’s translation of \textit{Hákonarmál}, for which he gives the title \textit{The Lay of Hákon}, it is still possible to hear the sound of battle as it is heard in the original:

\begin{quote}
Cut then \textbf{keenly} the \textbf{king’s broadsword} through foemen’s war-weeds, as though water it sundered.
\textbf{Clashed} then spear-blades, \textbf{cleft} were war-shields; did ring-decked war-swords \textbf{rattle} on helmets.\textsuperscript{103}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
(Svá beit þá sverð ór siklings hendi váðir Váfaðar, sem í vatn brygði. Brǫkuðu broddar, brotnuðu skildir, glumruðu gylfringar í gotna hausum.)\textsuperscript{104}
\end{quote}

Not only does Hollander employ eddic-like alliteration in his translation of \textit{Hákonarmál}, but his use of cutting consonants and harsh dentals (such as ‘cut’, ‘clashed’, ‘cleft’) in addition to his stylized, slightly archaic, word order create an acoustic poetic experience for the modern reader that chimes with Heusler’s approach to eddic poetry as music.

Unfortunately, Heusler’s idea did not hold in the Old Norse scholarly environment and Hollander’s translation has now been superseded by newer editions that do not seek to replicate acoustics in the same way that Hollander did.\textsuperscript{105} In spite of this, other scholars from Hollander’s generation continued to consider some elements of performance, suggesting that eddic and skaldic poetry may have been spoken in a highly stylized way, even if it was not ‘sung’. Turville-Petre, for example, focused on the verb \textit{kveða} to argue

\textsuperscript{102} Hollander, \textit{Old Norse Poems}. pp. xiv-xv.
\textsuperscript{103} Hollander, \textit{Old Norse Poems}. p. 69.
\textsuperscript{105} Arguably, the two most popular print editions of skaldic and eddic poetry in (English) translation are \textit{The Poetic Edda}, trans. and ed. C. Larrington (Oxford, 1996) and \textit{Snorra Edda: Snorri Sturluson}, trans. and ed. Faulkes.
that skaldic poetry may have been chanted. Similar ideas were voiced in the latter part of the twentieth-century, when De Geer (1985) rejected earlier definitions of skaldic ‘singing’ and suggested instead that skálds may have sung or chanted in free-rhythm. Kreutzer (1977) and Kuhn (1983) similarly argued that skaldic poetry, and in particular dróttkvætt, was not ‘sung’ in the narrow sense but rather characterised by emphasis such as pitch, loudness and stress.

Alongside these considerations of music or at least rhythmic presentation, some earlier scholars also considered Old Norse poetic performance in the context of religion, ritual and magic. In 1883, as Terry Gunnell has argued, Guðbrandur Vigfússon and F. York Powell produced the Corpus Poeticum Boreale in which they seemed to show awareness of the performative element of certain eddic poems, which they referred to as the ‘Western Islands’ Aristophanes.’ Bertha Phillpotts, for example, pursued the idea of eddic poetry as ritual drama. In The Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama (1920), Phillpotts argued that the eddic poems belonged to a dramatic ritual tradition paralleling the Greeks’ seasonal-vegetation ritual and claimed that they represented, as Gunnell summarises, ‘the actual shattered remains of ancient religious drama.’ Similarly, Magnus Olsen and later Ursula Dronke argued for a connection between eddic poetry and religious ritual, suggesting that certain eddic poems – in particular Skírnismál – were the remnants of ancient semi-dramatic fertility rites. Other scholars made similar claims about skaldic poetry: De Vries (1957) and later Turville-Petre (1976) both suggested that skaldic poetry may have had some connection to rune-carving and magical practice. Turville-Petre, for example, noted that the runic inscription on the Eggjum grave-stone (c. 650-700, Sognefjord, western Norway) was partially composed in the eddic metre galdralag (‘spell-metre’) and argued

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106 Turville-Petre, Scaldic Poetry, p. lxvi.
111 Turville-Petre, Scaldic Poetry, p. xx. For further discussion, see: Gade, The Structure of Old Norse Dróttkvætt Poetry, pp. 7-10.
that the performative act of carving metrical runes of this kind might have had some ritual or magical function in a death ceremony (possibly as a means of protecting the grave).\textsuperscript{112}

In terms of performance, the importance of these early scholars for this present thesis lies in their ability to regard Old Norse poetry not simply as a static textual object but as part of a living, breathing tradition. As noted above, Heusler drew attention to the acoustic experience of eddic poetry by defining the poetic line rhythmically, thereby moving away from the page-bound metrics that obsessed Finnur Jónsson and, ironically, still plagues many scholars today. Despite their appreciation for the musical character of Old Norse, however, it is noteworthy that most of these early scholars were still thinking only about the audience’s ear. How a poet might have used these sounds, in addition to his body and the physical performance space have hardly featured in any of these approaches. Even in Bertha Phillpotts’ analysis of early Scandinavian drama, eddic ‘performance’ is forced into a model of seasonal ritual drama without any regard for how these poems might have worked by themselves as live action, physical space or the poet’s attempt to maintain audience interest. Furthermore, it might be argued that these scholars often lacked the critical eye that characterises academia today. By taking their source material at face value as ‘genuine’ pagan ‘texts’, many of early scholars also often fell victim to flawed methodologies and imaginative interpretations that are now deemed both unscholarly and unproductive.

In short, the tendency for modern scholars to adopt a more critical stance than earlier skaldicists means that the less ‘tangible’ aspects of skaldic poetry, such as sound, music and ‘drama’, are very rarely given much attention. The fact that up until recently the dominant resources for most skaldicists have not been Heusler and Phillpotts but Finnur Jónsson’s \textit{Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning} (1912-15) (a work which represents the entire corpus of skaldic poetry in two volumes)\textsuperscript{113} and his \textit{Lexicon Poeticum} (1913-1916)\textsuperscript{114} reflects the more text-based, almost ‘scientific’ attitude amongst twentieth-century scholarship.

\textsuperscript{112} The Eggjum stone was found covering a man’s grave, with the inscription facing downwards. It contains a long runic inscription that is partly metrical and describes the ritual performance surrounding the dead-man’s funerary rite, whilst also invoking some sort of protection charm. According to the inscription, the stone was carved in darkness and never saw daylight: the performative act of carving must thus have had a very specific time setting, and an austere atmosphere surrounding it. See: Turville-Petre, \textit{Scaldic Poetry}, pp. xx - xxi.

\textsuperscript{113} Finnur Jónsson, \textit{Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning} (Copenhagen, 1912-15). As a diplomatic edition including manuscript variants, in addition to a ‘normalised’ edition accompanied by a Danish translation, Finnur was not averse to amending words, changing the order of a verse or silently adding or omitting the odd letter according to his own interpretations.

\textsuperscript{114} Finnur Jónsson and Sveinbjörn Egilsson, \textit{Lexicon poeticum antiquae linguae septentrionalis: Ordbok over det norsk-islandske skjaldeprog} (Copenhagen, 1913-1916; 1931). The \textit{Lexicon Poeticum} offered a revision of Sveinbjörn Egilsson’s earlier dictionary of Old Norse poetry from 1860.
similar lack of interest in sound or performance can be seen in Rudolf Meissner’s index of kennings, *Der Kenningar der Skalden* (1921), although this has also proved to be an important resource for skaldicists. It might be argued that works like these set the tone for skaldic scholarship up until the 1970s. Rather than building upon the arguments made by Heusler and other earlier scholars by adopting a more performance-based approached Old Norse, it appears that most skaldic scholarship throughout the twentieth-century was shaped by an increasingly text-based approach that valued picking apart kennings just as much as it enjoyed picking apart the mistakes of earlier scholars. As Roberta Frank argued in the 1980s: ‘[Today, we] survey the prejudices and misconceptions of the past, mapping out the history of skaldic studies as a history of error.’ It is perhaps this constant ‘looking back’ at past problems that prevented some scholars from looking forward and moving beyond viewing the written text as purely a form of literature.

1.7. Skaldic as Oral Poetry, Oral Poetry as Performance

Despite the impression given above, it would be wrong to suggest that the performance of skaldic poetry has been completely ignored by all recent scholarship. In Stefanie Würth’s analysis of skaldic performance (2007), for example, Würth considers the possibility of skaldic as oral poetry but concludes that skaldic poetry does not display any oral characteristics: it does not use formulas, the sentences are not rhythmically structured, and the performer has little room to improvise. In fact, Würth views skaldic poetry as ‘a highly artificial literary art’ intended more for reading on the page than for live aural reception. In short, Würth’s analysis and ultimate reflection of skaldic performance demonstrates a very limited understanding of oral poetic theory. Würth’s approach thus typifies a real problem in Old Norse scholarship: the tendency to view skaldic poetry according to outdated or limited oral models and then fail to engage with skaldic verse as anything other than a verbal text printed on paper. In comparison to the unstable methodologies of earlier scholars, such caution can of course be a virtue. Yet caution can also turn into

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116 Frank, ‘Skaldic Poetry’, p. 158.
119 See below (Chapter 1.8) for further discussion.
restraint when it prevents skaldicists from stepping out of their comfort zone and fully engaging with other relevant disciplines, such as Oral Theory and Performance Studies, which would undoubtedly enhance our understanding of the nature of ninth- and tenth-century skaldic poetry.

Unlike the Lord-Parry model which dominated oral scholarship for most of the twentieth-century, the ‘new wave’ of oral theory that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s with the likes of John Miles Foley, Ruth Finnegan and Richard Bauman has emphasised the huge degree of variation in terms of different oral traditions. In doing so, these ‘new wave’ scholars have opened up what was once a comparatively marginalised discipline and provided new methodologies field to approach all types of oral poetry and, more importantly, oral performance. These scholars have demonstrated that most oral poetry does not conform to Lord-Parry’s simple definition of improvisation and formula. Indeed, ‘oral’ poetry is characterised by diversity that makes it difficult to define: the field ranges from Tibetan Prayer singers and Homeric verse to Chinese oral ballads and American Slam. The scholars in question (and others alongside them) have fashioned new methodologies and models to deal with the various types of oral poetry in a way that is more sensitive to the particularities of each tradition. Most importantly, this ‘new wave’ of oral theory acknowledges that oral poetry is about more than just the mouth and ears: it

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120 I will not spend time describing the Lord-Parry model in great detail here, partly because it is so well known amongst both Oral and Old Norse scholars, and partly because there are other scholarly works which discuss oral-formulaic theory in more detail. The main point to remember with the Lord-Parry model, however, is that it rejects memorisation and emphasises the idea of improvisation, and thus variation, being key characteristics in oral poetry. Essentially, for the oral poet, ‘the moment of composition is in the performance’, Lord, Singer of Tales, p. 13. My italics.


123 Foley’s idea of Ethnopoetics is a good example of the kind of attitudes and approaches that scholars have developed towards oral art. Foley proposes that an ethnopoetic reading of a text should allow the scholar to understand and interpret the poem according to the poet’s own rules. That is, the scholar should not force a literary, book-bound understanding of line-length, metrics and page typography onto a poem that was conceived under entirely different circumstances, and thus thought about in a completely different way. This cognitive switch that Foley proposes for an ethnopoetic reading of a text is particularly useful for the study of Old Norse, as skalds composing before the onset of literacy certainly did not compose poetry thinking of printed paper and evenly-spaced page layout. For further discussion of ethnopoetics, see: Foley, How to Read an Oral Poem, pp. 11-19. My italics.
involves movement, gesture, eye contact, audience, atmosphere and ‘event’. As such, more recent oral scholars have argued that oral poetry by its nature necessitates performance in a much wider sense of the word (see Chapter 3.1–3.7) and have thus called for a more performance-orientated approach to oral poetry.

Würth’s failure to approach skaldic poetry with an informed understanding of oral theory or apply methodologies used by scholars working within the vibrant oral-performance scene means that, like so many skaldists, her analysis ends up being rather short sighted. Nonetheless, it might be said that the problem has not been relieved by those working in oral scholarship, those who might be said to be just as guilty in their own general neglect of considering skaldic poetry from the viewpoint of oral performance. Whereas the explosion of fieldwork and research into oral theory has explored everything from Yugoslav ballads to African Praise poets and Eskimo verses, skaldic poetry has been resolutely overlooked. While Old English poetry has been subject to oral analysis by the likes of non-medievalists such as Albert Lord and John Miles Foley, just as skaldicists dare not stray into the realms of less book-bound oral theory, oral scholars seem to prefer to leave court poetry and kennings to skaldic experts. This lack of communication between the two academic disciplines has thus produced a gap in our understanding of skaldic poetry as oral poetry, and it is this gap that might be said to prevent more confident and informed approaches to the study of skaldic performance.

Fortunately, a handful of Old Norse scholars have begun to bridge this gap by reacting to the ‘new wave’ of oral theory, successfully incorporating the concept of orality into the academic discussion of Old Norse poetry. Of course, as with those who have considered the performance of Old English poetry, there are certain key problems facing any scholars who study Old Norse poetry from the viewpoint of oral poetry. Unlike most oral theorists who are able to conduct fieldwork on living oral traditions, Old Norse scholars no longer have access to eddic and skaldic poetry as live oral performance. Joseph Harris

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124 See, for example: Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem*, p. 60.
125 For example, neither Finnegan nor Foley address skaldic verse, despite covering a wide range of oral traditions in their respective works.
126 There is often a degree of overlap between scholars studying Old English and Old Norse (usually eddic) poetry, so it is interesting that skaldic poetry has virtually been untouched by oral scholars.
128 Ruth Finnegan, for example, has spent much time listening to and documenting African oral poetry. See: Finnegan, *The Oral and Beyond*. Unfortunately, for Old Norse scholars, all that remains of these oral traditions
explains this problem when he argues that the *Poetic Edda* does not represent an archive of field-notes (like the Child Ballads or even Foley’s own observations reflect) but a carefully selected written anthology of poems: in short, the compiler of the *Codex Regius* was not simply recording oral poems, but arranging them thematically into a larger literary work.  

John McKinnell makes a similar point when he argues that the thirteenth-century Icelandic manuscripts preserve *memories* of ‘past performances’ rather than verbal transcripts of ninth-century performance. Terry Gunnell, meanwhile, reminds us that the *Codex Regius* of the Poetic Edda cannot be seen as reflecting eddic poems in their ‘original’ pre-Christian form but rather the ‘preserved’ (albeit probably altered) twelfth- or thirteenth-century oral form that the scribe heard before writing them down.

The same problems will, of course, apply to skaldic verse. Even if skaldic poetry maintained ‘verbal’ stability during oral transmission, in its present written state it is ultimately only a reflection of the oral form it which it had been preserved just before it was penned to parchment. All the same, while Old Norse oral scholarship is somewhat hindered by its inability to access live oral performance directly, as John Miles Foley has demonstrated in his oral category ‘Voices From the Past’ in *How to Read and Oral Poem* (2001), this should not prevent determined efforts to investigate the oral nature of Old Norse poetry. In fact, as Joseph Harris argues: ‘that this “desire” is “driven” by “nostalgia” for unheard voices does not, for me, invalidate the drive to find them,’ a sentiment echoed by Foley who argues: ‘a partially reconstructed frame of reference [i.e. imagining a poem being performed] is surely better than misreading this oral-derived poetry as unilaterally textual.’

Fortunately, while comparatively little attention has been given to the performance of skaldic poetry, the connections between the theories of oral poetry and Old Norse poetry as a whole have been receiving increasing attention and debate over the last fifty years, even though few Old Norse scholars have actually considered the element of ‘orality’ from silent written texts, so it is impossible to conduct fieldwork on living traditions. For further discussion regarding the potential performance or ‘re-oralisation’ of skaldic poetry, however, see below Chapters 2.5-2.6.


Gunnell, ‘Eddic Poetry’, pp. 82-3.

Harris, ‘“Ethnopaleography” and Recovered Performance’, p. 97.

the viewpoint of live performance. Robert Kellogg might be said to be the first Old Norse scholar to fully engage with the Lord-Parry model when he wrote his *Concordance of Eddic Poetry* in 1958, arguing that eddic poems were essentially the same as the Yugoslav epics studied by Lord and Parry.\(^{134}\) Over decade later, in 1971, Lars Lönnroth took up the question of oral-formulaic theory again when he wrote an article for the journal *Speculum* entitled ‘Hjálmar’s Death-Song and the Delivery of Eddic Poetry.’\(^{135}\) In this article, Lönnroth complained that in Old Norse scholarship there had been ‘very little reaction among Scandinavianists to Kellogg’s views or to the oral-formulaic theory as a whole.’\(^{136}\) In the article in question, Lönnroth made knowledgeable use of both Kellogg’s work and the Lord-Parry model in his argument that that parallel passages in Old Norse poetry, such as those in Hjálmar’s famous death-song, were in fact evidence that memorisation – as opposed to purely improvisation – must have played an important role within Old Norse oral composition.\(^{137}\)

Lönnroth’s attitude towards skaldic and eddic poetry – his willingness not only to engage with, but to question, oral theory – was an important development in Old Norse scholarship as it made scholars aware that many of the poems preserved in the *Codex Regius*, *Snorra Edda* and saga texts could actually be studied within a wider context of oral tradition. It took another decade, however, until Joseph Harris revised Lönnroth’s ideas and offered a fresh perspective on the role of orality in Old Norse poetic composition. In his article ‘Eddic Poetry as Oral Poetry’, (1983), Harris criticises Lönnroth’s approach to the oral composition of what Lönnroth calls *Hjálmar’s Death-Song*, arguing that Lönnroth’s methodology, with its analysis of formulas and variation, was still nonetheless a little too dependent on the Lord-Parry model.\(^{138}\) Joseph Harris is perhaps one of the few Old Norse scholars who has been consistently ready to engage with modern oral theorists such as Foley whilst criticising those who take the oral background of eddic poetry for granted without making any real attempt to place the *Edda* in a broader survey of oral poetry. Given that his research addresses a wide-range of topics including folklore, ballads, Germanic


\(^{137}\) Lars Lönnroth has published notable research on a range of oral works, for example: Lönnroth, L., *Den Dubbla Scenen: Muntlig Diktning Från Eddan till Abba* (Stockholm, 1978).

mythology and orality, as well as Old Norse literature (on which he is a recognised authority), the strength of Harris’ approach is that he has regularly been able incorporate alternative perspectives and methodologies into his analysis of Old Norse poetry.139

Partly as a result of this breadth of background, Harris has provided some noteworthy insights into eddic and skaldic orality. Indeed, Harris was one of the first Norse scholars to really challenge the Lord-Parry model when he called instead for a more ‘ethnic’ reading of Old Norse poetry according to the ethnopaleographical model developed by oral scholars such as Dennis Tedlock and John Miles Foley.140 On the one hand, Harris develops the idea of deliberate composition as an alternative to the black-and-white categories of improvisation and memorisation in oral tradition.141 In terms of deliberate composition, Harris argues that some types of Old Norse poetry could be ‘deliberately’ composed and recited from memory, just as much as they could be improvised. In fact, Harris suggests a spectrum which reflects the variety of compositional and transmission techniques that eddic and skaldic poets enjoyed:

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<td>Example</td>
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<td>Old English lausavísur long</td>
<td>Hjálmar’s re-oralised written</td>
<td>skaldic Death</td>
<td>poems i.e. Song song/story</td>
<td>Höfuðlausn</td>
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In contrast to Lönnroth and Lord-Parry’s ‘one-size-fits-all’ model, and in keeping with more recent oral theory, Harris thus demonstrates that many levels of composition, memorisation and improvisation were present within the creation and transmission of Old Norse poetry. His spectrum suggests that depending on the genre or style of poem, skálds might recite a poem learnt by heart or adapt it during performance, just as much as they might compose on the spot. More recently, Harris has also applied Dennis Tedlock’s ethnopaleological model to the idea of eddic poetry as music, among other things reviving (and revising) Jean de Laborde’s eighteenth-century recording of eddic ‘songs’ as evidence for a possible Old Norse musical tradition. Although Harris acknowledges the potential problems of a methodology that depends on living traditions to ‘inform’ scholars about past performances, his approach and attitude towards Old Norse poetry are nevertheless useful, not least because Harris consistently looks beyond the text and examines Old Norse verse first and foremost as an oral phenomenon, rather than just written poetry with oral origins. Whilst Harris’ innovative approach has had an invaluable impact in the field of Old Norse as oral poetry, he does not always seem to move beyond the idea of oral poetry as words. For example, Harris does not seem to fully engage with how a skáld’s use of sound, space, body language and facial expression might have affected the audience’s understanding of a poem.

Stephen Mitchell has recently offered another performance-orientated perspective of Old Norse poetry. Like Harris, Mitchell’s research interests are wide-ranging and include folklore, performance and oral theory. In his article ‘Performance and Norse Poetry: The Hydromel of Praise and Effluvia of Scorn’, (2001), Mitchell questions how recent, less black-and-white approaches to medieval texts such as the ethnography of speaking and Performance Studies can be used to ‘decode the social, religious, and literary worlds of Northern Europe’. Informed by performance-orientated scholars such as Richard Bauman, Mitchell, S. A., ‘Performance and Norse Poetry: the Hydromel of Praise and the Effluvia of Scorn’, The Albert Lord and Milman Parry Lecture for 2001 in Oral Tradition 16/1 (2001), 168-9.

142 Harris, ‘‘Ethnopaleography’ and Recovered Performance’.
143 Unfortunately, unlike the native Quiché speakers that Tedlock uses in his ethnopaleological analysis, Harris does not have native Old Norse speakers to shed light on eddic tradition, which makes his desire (and ability) to look beyond the written text all the more admirable.
Clifford Geertz, and John Miles Foley (if not Richard Schechner), this article shows Mitchell to be one of few Old Norse oral scholars to actively engage with the relatively new and vibrant field of Performance Theory and effectively apply this theory to Norse performance.¹⁴⁶

Like Harris’ work, Mitchell’s discussion of Norse performance is impressive. In the article mentioned above, for example, he questions the importance of social interaction (especially hospitality) within the Old Norse understanding of poetry, underlining that all communication should be viewed as performative behaviour, and not least public forms of communication.¹⁴⁷ Such an approach is not only refreshing but also desperately needed within Norse academia. It is unfortunate that, even today, such an approach remains on the margins of Norse scholarship rather than occupying a prime position as a core methodology. In terms of skaldic performance, however, it might be said that the only criticism of Mitchell’s approach is his focus on the saga’s thirteenth-century narrative representations and cultural understanding of poetry in performance: he does not consider why or how these poems might have worked in live, oral performance in the ninth- and tenth-centuries when they were apparently originally ‘composed’. Although such an approach is certainly valid and productive for the purposes of Mitchell’s enquiry (see above), in terms of skaldic performance it does not reach much farther than the extant written text and never really attempts to analyse how features such as sound, visual setting and atmosphere might have worked within the socially-complex performance contexts that Mitchell describes.

1.8. Old Norse ‘Drama’ and Performance

Another approach that some scholars have adopted in terms of skaldic performance is to veer away from the discussion of orality and articulated sound, and instead focus more on ‘drama’, ‘dramatic performance’ and other forms of public entertainment (and ritual). Edith Marold (2007), for example, has discussed the genre of mansǫngr mentioned in the Icelandic religious text Jóns saga helga and argued that the term ‘mansǫngr’ does not refer to skaldic ‘love-songs’ as scholars have previously thought, but rather to other poems of an

¹⁴⁶ As will be noted below, another scholar who engages with Performance Studies is Terry Gunnell, as he approaches eddic poetry from a wholly performance-orientated perspective. In terms of Old Norse oral scholarship, however, Performance Studies remains a largely marginalised and relatively unknown field.
obscene nature which people sang to one another during lively gatherings.\footnote{Marold notes that in the Icelandic religious text \textit{Jóns saga helga}, the author made various complaints about the tradition of \textit{mansǫngr}. In the L version of the saga (\textit{Holm perg} 5 fol), the author described the tradition as 'sá leikr' ('that game') in which men and women danced whilst addressing lewd poems to one another. In the S version (AM 221 fol), the author described the tradition as an ugly game: 'leikr sá var mǫnnum tótr er ófagrligr er' ('that game which was an unattractive [i.e. bawdy] custom among men'). See: Marold, E., 'Mansǫngr - a Phantom Genre?' in \textit{Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World}, pp. 240-262.} In fact, Marold even suggests that dancing may have been involved in these erotic performances (as in the later \textit{vikivaki} traditions that Terry Gunnell has examined).\footnote{For more information on the \textit{vikivaki} tradition, see: Gunnell, T., ‘Waking the “Wiggle-Waggle” Monsters: Animal Figures and Cross-Dressing in the Icelandic \textit{Vikivaki Games},’ in \textit{Folk Drama Studies Today: The International Traditional Drama Conference 2002}, ed. E. Cass and P. Millington (Sheffield, 2003), pp. 207-225 and Gunnell, \textit{Origins of Drama}, pp. 147-151.}

Marold concludes that it is uncertain whether the tradition of \textit{mansǫngr} was native to Iceland or whether it was influenced by European ballads, but it nonetheless seems certain that a tradition of erotic dance song performed by individuals or groups existed in thirteenth-century Iceland. Unfortunately, Marold does not go much further than pointing out its existence, and never attempts to consider the kind of the performance that skaldic love poetry might have involved. Although it is interesting to see Marold engage with the idea that \textit{mansǫngr} might have taken the form of a dramatic game, which distinguished these verses from the skaldic love-verses preserved in saga literature, unfortunately, like the scholars discussed above, Marold’s approach is very much lacking in terms of performance analysis, compared with other approaches such as Gunnell’s analysis of \textit{vikivaki} (see above). Marold’s approach is again essentially text-based involving a comparison of between various written accounts of traditions in Iceland and others referred to in continental sources. Nonetheless, as the words of the \textit{mansǫngr} which Marold discusses are no longer available to us in their original form (in either textual or oral form), she never engages in a detailed performance analysis of what she herself terms a ‘phantom genre’. Whilst the value of Marold’s approach is that it at least corroborates the idea that a lively performance scene existed in thirteenth-century Iceland, she again never looks beyond the page: her focus is ultimately on defining and finding evidence for the ‘phantom’ \textit{mansǫngr} tradition, rather than on trying to interpret how these poems might have worked in live performance.

In contrast, Terry Gunnell’s analysis of Old Norse poetry over the last twenty years has taken a markedly more performance-orientated perspective. Given Gunnell’s own background in drama and theatre studies, he has produced an impressive body of
scholarship that analyses eddic and skaldic poetry not so much as written literature, but as a combination of live sound and physical action: in other words, as musical, dramatic performance. In his book-length study *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (1995), based on his PhD thesis (1991), Gunnell conducts a historical survey of ‘dramatic’ traditions in early Scandinavia and notes a deep-rooted connection between early ‘religious’ rituals and dramatic performance.150 Using a wide variety of archaeological sources, ranging from lure horns and tenth-century bear masks to Bronze Age petroglyphs depicting dancing figures, acrobats, bird-like costumes and ‘mock battle scenes’ in addition to various written accounts, Gunnell makes a strong and convincing case for early ritual drama performances having existed in the Nordic countries long before eddic poetry was composed.151 Furthermore, Gunnell examines the numerous folk dramas in medieval Scandinavia involving costumed combat traditions and guising games such as the mainland *Julebukk* traditions and the Icelandic *Vikivaki* dance games, arguing that these later dramatic traditions might represent a continuation – and development – of earlier ritual dramas.152 Although the aim of Gunnell’s book is to revive, and more importantly revise, Bertha Phillpott’s earlier claims that some eddic poetry might have grown out of ancient ritual dramas (see Chapter 1.6), his extensive analysis nevertheless provides compelling evidence for a rich, varied and ongoing tradition of ritual and folk drama having existed in early Scandinavia.

In addition to establishing an important historical context for the performance of Old Norse poetry, the main value of Gunnell’s research is his attitude and approach with regard to the concept of ‘drama’, which demonstrates great sensitivity to medieval, and particularly Old Norse, understanding. Gunnell notes, for example, that whilst no Old Norse manuscripts record a word with the direct meaning of ‘drama’, the more general terms *leikr* is often used not least as a means of describing activities involving play, game, ritual and religious festivals.153 Gunnell thus suggests that ‘drama’ did not exist in the medieval Scandinavian mind as a single, separate genre but rather as a blurring of various social and

150 Gunnell has since developed this argument, which begins in his monograph *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*, and also applied it to Eddic monologues (such as *Völuspá* and *Grímnismál*) and even some skaldic verse (such as *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*) in a range of articles. For a full list of Gunnell’s research, see his online bibliography: Háskóli Íslands, Dr. Terry Gunnell (Professor) Online CV, https://notendur.hi.is/~terry/cv.html (viewed 25 November, 2014).
religious activities. As a result, Gunnell argues that scholars must dismiss contemporary notions of drama and theatre when approaching Old Norse poetry and performance: the proscenium-arch theatre, raised platforms, curtained stages, costumed actors and ticket-paying audience members had no place in the recitation of eddic poetry, any more than they had in other forms of dramatic performance in the medieval period. He nonetheless argues that it is important to consider all performance (and not least that of eddic and skaldic poetry) as something that works in time and space (like drama) and has the potential of veering in and out of the sphere of drama.

Gunnell’s approach makes it difficult for more literary-minded scholars to persist in their text-based analysis of eddic verse and deny that Old Norse poetry must have been delivered in some sort of performance mode which may well have often veered into the ‘dramatic’. Following on from his historical survey of literary and archaeologically proven evidence for early Scandinavian performance as presented in The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia (1995), Gunnell goes on to consider the evidence implied by the manuscript recordings of eddic poetry. In doing so, Gunnell puts forward a pioneering argument (developed from Phillpott’s earlier work) that the dialogic ljóðaháttr poems, all of which take the form of direct speech and lack any third-person explanatory narrative, were actually closer to folk dramas or ‘plays’ than they were our modern concept of page-bound poetry.

As such, Gunnell suggests that the performer (or performers) were effectively forced to step into the role of the gods in the poems, ‘speaking’ themselves in the role of characters such as Freyr in Skírnismál or any of Ægir’s unfortunate guests in Lokasenna. Furthermore, Gunnell notes that short-hand notation for speakers such as ‘l.q.’ (loki kvad) which appears in the outer margins of both the Codex Regius and AM 748 manuscripts next

154 Gunnell, Origins of Drama, pp. 30-37.
155 In his article ‘The Rights of the Player,’ (which builds on parts of The Origins of Drama), Gunnell conducts a historical investigation into the figures referred to as leikarar, loddarar and trúðar in Old Norse saga texts. After examining both native and European evidence, Gunnell concludes that these ‘players’ were a class of foreign entertainers who travelled around Scandinavian courts and engaged in flamboyant displays such as slapstick comedy, circus acts, singing and playing instruments. As part of his discussion, Gunnell notes how much the notion of ‘cheap’ theatrical, visual spectacle (provided by itinerant foreign clowns and actors) seems to have been viewed with contempt by both pre- and post-Christian Scandinavian skílds such as Pórboðn hornklofi (tenth-century) and Máni (twelfth-century). In short, his article demonstrates that skílds saw themselves as distinct from the more ‘theatrical’ performers at court, but nonetheless under threat from them within the field of entertainment and performance. See: Gunnell, T., “‘The Rights of the Player’: Evidence of Mimi and Histriones in Early Medieval Scandinavia”, Comparative Drama 30 (Spring, 1996), 1-31.
to the dialogue of five of the ljóðaháttr poems (and in no other Old Norse manuscripts). Gunnell argues that these markings are similar to those found in several medieval French and English manuscripts from the same period containing dramatic texts, notation which, like the speaker notation in Codex Regius, did not form part of the performed work itself but seems instead to have been meant for performers or readers who could not view the performance.\textsuperscript{158} For Gunnell, this serves as further evidence that these eddic poems were composed, performed and received in space and time in the form of rudimentary plays.

It might be argued that Gunnell is the first scholar who really draws attention to the fact that when eddic poetry was ‘composed’ and passed on before the advent of writing, it was never conceived of as written texts – as black and white symbols on parchment – nor was it ever intended for reading. Whilst scholars such as Joseph Harris and Stephen Mitchell have explored the oral nature of Old Norse poetry, it might be argued that Gunnell is the only one who has dared go beyond the written word and interpret what it means for a poet to be composing without a pen in his hand. In a series of wonderfully vivid metaphors describing the extant written form of eddic poetry as the dirty dishes and turkey bones left after a Christmas dinner\textsuperscript{159} and a ‘dead butterfly pinned to a board in a museum,’\textsuperscript{160} Gunnell emphasises that eddic poetry in its ‘original’ form would have been a completely different phenomenon to the written form in which it is now preserved. Essentially, Gunnell argues that what is now a static textual object was originally conceived in acoustic sound and meaningful rhythm, as live interaction and communication – a ‘shared experience’ – between real speaker and listener.\textsuperscript{161} More importantly, Gunnell argues that the poem would have changed in every performance: among other things, each audience (and audience member) would have approached the performance with their own expectations, memories and personal backgrounds, working with a different performer, a different time or a different place to produce what must be seen as a very different work. Gunnell, under the direct influence of oral theorist John Miles Foley and performance theorist Richard Schechner, thus argues that an eddic poem should be seen as something that was

\textsuperscript{158} Gunnell, \textit{The Origins of Drama}, pp. 283-329.
\textsuperscript{159} Gunnell, T., ‘“The Uses of Performance Studies for the Study of Old Norse Religion”: The Performance of Old Norse Myth and Ritual’, Lecture given at the University of Zürich, 27-28th October 2011 [article forthcoming].
\textsuperscript{160} Gunnell, ‘The Performance of the Poetic Edda’, p. 300.
‘perpetually under construction’ with ‘changing contextual elements’ meaning that each performance was unique (even if the text remained the same). Even with the ongoing process of restoration and rebuilding, no performance could ever be repeated (see Chapter 2.2).  

In short, although other scholars have regularly noted the probable ‘fluidity’ of eddic poetry in terms of the constantly changing verbal text, only Gunnell actually engages with the idea of changing performance contexts and their influence on performance itself. In fact, one of the outstanding strengths of Gunnell’s research is that unlike other scholars who dare not leave the comfort of the silent written word, he actively promotes the potential of using the Performance Studies method developed by Richard Schechner. In a recent lecture that introduced Performance Studies to Old Norse scholars, Gunnell clearly elucidated how he felt this performance-based approach can – and should – be applied to eddic poetry.  

Stressing the importance of what Foley calls the ‘lost context’ of eddic performance (which would have included eye-contact, sound, a smoky dimly-lit hall and the quaffing of alcoholic beverages among other things), Gunnell has noted that all we have of eddic poems are the ‘fragmentary remains’ of the much larger performed works that people would have originally encountered. In short, Gunnell argued that these poems would have originally gained their meaning from how they interacted with real people, as part of a shared experience in space and time. Gunnell thus proposes a new methodology inspired by scholars such as Schechner (which focus on experience and activity) which he calls performance archaeology. By conducting performance archaeology, Gunnell argues that it is possible to examine the material remains (i.e. the eddic ‘texts’), and replace them in the form and context in which they were originally intended: in other words, as live interactions between audience, performer and surroundings.

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163 Judy Quinn, for example, has used manuscript evidence of Völuspá to argue that there were at least two divergent oral traditions, demonstrating that oral eddic poems could not be confined to one fixed text and were therefore liable to change during transmission. See: Quinn, J., ‘Völuspá and the Composition of Eddic Verse’, in Atti del 12° congreso internazionale di studi sull’alto medioevo. Poetry in the Scandinavian Middle Ages, ed. T. Paroli (Spoleto, 1990), pp. 303-20. Only Gunnell (see list of work above), however, explores how ‘fluidity’ or change in transmission can refer to elements in performance beyond the verbal text (such as time, space, audience and the performer’s use of gesture and sound).
165 Gunnell, ‘The Uses of Performance Studies for the Study of Old Norse Religion.’
In terms of a poem’s ‘lost’ context, one of the main ‘missing’ performance elements that Gunnell considers is that of sound. Like earlier scholars such as Heusler and Hollander, Gunnell emphasises the musical, lyrical nature of many eddic poems. In a recent article, Gunnell questions, for example, how a listening audience might have received the poem Völuspá in the form of sound, arguing that the extant text shows the poet-performer frequently combining literary images (such as the sea) with aural sounds (such as sibilance) to create a rich acoustic and figurative experience for the listener. Elsewhere, Gunnell considers both sound and vision along with physical presence, arguing that in the dialogic and monologic ljóðaháttr poems such as Skírnismál, Vafþrúðnismál and Grímnismál, the performer speaks directly to the audience in the role of a god speaking in first-person, which means that the poetry involves an uppvakning or ‘summoning up’ of supernatural beings into the performance space. Gunnell argues that in speaking as one of the gods, the performer would have engaged in an act of what Richard Schechner calls ‘make believe’, temporarily invoking two worlds at once. By encountering the performer in his role as a god, the audience would have found themselves inhabiting both the physical hall and the world of the gods themselves, something that created a liminal experience and simultaneously introduces a temporary sense of ‘sacred time.

In addition to considering the sound, imagery and format of the texts, Gunnell also argues that one can (and should) use evidence concerning the likely performance space as part of the ‘performance archaeology’. Given what we know from archaeology and written sources about the socio-political and living conditions in Scandinavia, Gunnell argues (as noted above) that most performances (of eddic and skaldic poetry) would have probably occurred amongst ale-drinking males in a noisy, smoky hall during the evenings (see Chapter 3.6). In his article on Völuspá, Gunnell takes this further when he argues that the physical performance space of the hall could be seen as a representation of the pre-Christian Old Norse religious world.


Although Gunnell notes that the dialectal and sound of the Old Norse language would have changed over time, he regards Völuspá as a transcription of the poem in its twelfth- or thirteenth-century oral form, which thus makes his approach valid. See: Gunnell, ‘The Belief Contexts and Performance of Völuspá’.


Norse cosmos.\(^{171}\) For example, the hall space usually contained the ás (main beam) being held up by the shorter dvergar (dwarf-beams, holding up the sky i.e. roof), with decorated or carved tree trunks (pillars or súlur) running down either side of an Odinnic-like high-seat in the middle of the room, opposite a fire or cauldron where the chieftain would sit.\(^{172}\) In a recent lecture, Gunnell also pointed out how in the poem *Grímnismál*, the poet could have used his surroundings to take his audience on a ‘guided tour’ across the various homes of the gods in the sky before returning back to the hall of Óðinn himself. More importantly, Gunnell suggested that through the process of bringing the gods into the performance space by means of the first-person narrative and the (perhaps ritualistic) use of gestures and soundscapes, the performer could make use of the double-aspect of his surroundings to temporarily transform the physical performance space into another mythological space, such as Ægir’s or Vafþrúðnir’s hall. In short, Gunnell argues that by using elements of role-play or gesture, the skálds and those who performed the eddic poems had the power to momentarily transform their audience into mythical hall-dwellers or other supernatural characters.\(^{173}\)

In terms of attitude and approach, it might be argued that Gunnell’s performance-based analysis of eddic poetry is exactly what all Old Norse scholars should be doing when studying Old Norse poetry, if they wish to study it in the form in which it was meant to be received. Rather than giving a cursory glance to the oral origins and background of eddic and skaldic verse, Gunnell underlines that it is crucial to go further, and examine the ‘lost’ performance context that would have effectively defined the poem and given it meaning. By considering the role of other common elements of performance such as the use of gesture, eye-contact, intonation, pitch, pace, physical space, time, occasion, audience, atmosphere and event, Gunnell makes an important move away from book-bound scholarship. The real strength of Gunnell’s work is thus that he does not simply consider the *what* in performance – *what* sound and *what* space, for example – but also the *how* and *why*. In short, Gunnell deliberately explores the transformative effect a living performance can have on a watching and listening audience: the power any performance has to engage with different levels of

\(^{171}\) Gunnell, T. ‘*Völuspá in Performance.*’


\(^{173}\) Gunnell, ‘On the Dating and Nature of “Eddic Poetry”’.
ritual, play, liminality and ‘make-believe’ as part of a dynamic, meaningful interaction between two physically-present parties who are both immersed in the atmosphere and living event. This ‘archaeological’ approach to performance studies will thus be hugely influential for my own analysis of skaldic performance.

Another scholar who has briefly considered the role of the performer in eddic (but unfortunately not skaldic) poetry is John McKinnell.\(^{174}\) In his recent examination of the first person singular ek (‘I’) in the eddic poem Hávamál, McKinnell argues that the ‘I’ in the poem seems to a shifting entity, who takes on a series of different personae such as the good guest, the bad guest, the traveller and the fool. To his mind, this means that: ‘he [the performer] is perhaps less like an actor inhabiting a role than an impressionist who can adopt whatever character suits the point he is making at any particular moment.’\(^ {175}\) More importantly, as part of his examination of the performance dynamic, McKinnell argues that the performer would have needed to shift with fluidity not only between characters, but in and out of character altogether. For example, McKinnell argues that in Hávamál strophe 109, ek refers to the performer speaking as Óðinn, while in strophe 110 the speaker steps back from his impersonation of Óðinn and back into the role of performer.\(^ {176}\) Whilst it is always refreshing to see scholars admitting an awareness of the performer in Old Norse poetry, it seems that McKinnell’s approach and attitude towards the subject nonetheless remains slightly tentative and somewhat limited. Unlike Gunnell, who looks beyond the text and actively engages in Performance Studies theory, McKinnell, never really goes beyond the idea of sound and the speaking voice: there is little regard for the performance space or audience interaction, which might have informed his discussion and taken it to a new level.

Another scholar who has considered the role of the performer and the importance of his relationship with the listening audience is Judy Quinn.\(^ {177}\) In fact, Quinn quite rightly argues that maintaining the audience’s interest would have been crucial to the performer, whose job was to ‘captivate – even enthral – the audience’ with his work.\(^ {178}\) The value of Quinn’s approach is that she shows some appreciation of not just what the performer was

\(^{174}\) McKinnell, J., ‘Personae of the Performer in Hávamál’, Saga Book of the Viking Society of Northern Research 37 (2013), 27-42. It might be noted that McKinnell is also actively involved in drama and not least the study of medieval theatre.

\(^{175}\) McKinnell, ‘Personae of the Performer in Hávamál’, p. 28.


\(^{177}\) Quinn, J., “Ok er þetta upphaf”: First Stanza Quotation in Old Norse Prosimetrum’, Alvíssmál 7 (1997), 61-80.

\(^{178}\) Quinn, “Ok er þetta upphaf”, p. 63.
doing (for example, in Hávamál, adopting various roles) but why he was doing it. Quinn argues: ‘[live performance must have] required telling an engaging story as well as flourishing quotations in an impressive manner, warding off both audience boredom and competition from fellow reciters keen to take their turn on the floor.’ Unlike other scholars who have examined Old Norse prosimetrum from a very literary, text-based perspective (as discussed above), Quinn not only acknowledges the oral pre-history of saga texts but also actively engages with the phenomenon of live performance.

In short, like Gunnell and oral scholars such as Foley, Quinn looks beyond the printed page and draws attention to the fact that any performer would have needed to be attentive to his audience’s needs. As she writes:

> The live reciter of saga prosimetrum would have been in a position to monitor the success of each of these aspects [i.e. the performer’s skill] of his performance to adapt his repertoire to maximise theatrical effect – to digress, elaborate or quote more extensively according to audience reaction.\(^\text{180}\)

Although Quinn does not explicitly engage with modern oral theory, her observations echo the findings of scholars such as Foley and Jegede who argue that the oral performer would always respond to his or her situation and adapt his or her performance accordingly.\(^\text{181}\) Whilst Quinn’s consideration of audience-performer interaction during the skáld’s performance certainly signals another step in the right direction for Old Norse scholarship, she nonetheless does not investigate how a performer may have used sound and space to keep his audience entertained, nor the meaning and effect that this might have had upon the audience’s understanding of a poem. Nevertheless Quinn, in addition to the scholars mentioned, has provided useful insights and an important foundation for future research to build upon, particularly for research focusing more on the ‘liveness’ of skaldic court performance.

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\(^{179}\) Quinn, “‘Ok er þetta upphaf’, p. 63.

\(^{180}\) Quinn, “‘Ok er þetta upphaf’, p. 63.

1.9. The Social and Political Dynamics of Skaldic Court Performance

Another line of enquiry that scholars have pursued with regard to skaldic performance is the socio-political dynamic that existed amongst the poets performing before their patrons at the royal court in ninth- and tenth-century Norway. Folke Ström, for example, argues that the poetic activity at Jarl Hákon’s court (c. 975-95) should be viewed in terms of power-politics, and essentially with regard to the fact that the skálds were responsible for broadcasting the jarl’s political ideology and consolidating his reputation amongst his retinue (see Chapter 4).\(^{182}\) Ström surveys the figurative imagery and language used in a variety of poems thought to have been composed by Hákon’s court skálds as evidence that skaldic performance effectively functioned as important political propaganda. Ström’s general thesis offers a fresh perspective of skaldic poetry from the point of view not only of the skáld, but also the patron and the listening audience and is thus a good starting point for my own analysis of the form and function of pre-Christian skaldic verse (see Chapters 3 and 4). Ström’s approach towards skaldic poetry is nonetheless once again predominantly limited to a literary perspective. His argument that ‘skaldic poetry is a verbal art-form of rare sophistication, where every individual detail has behind it a fully excogitated sequence of ideas, in which numerous component elements and associated lines of thought are held in balance,’\(^ {183} \) makes it clear that Ström is thinking only in terms of the verbal text, and not looking beyond the words themselves.

Despite arguing that the skálds functioned not only as political broadcasters but also as rivals with one another for Hákon’s favour, Ström never attempts to engage with how a skáld might have used performance – such as his tone of voice, eye contact or gesture – to distinguish himself from other skálds within the performance space of the jarl’s hall. In fact, Ström does not seem to have been aware of modern oral theory or fieldwork that might have been beneficial to his research and considerations of the role of poetry in socio-political dynamics at court.\(^ {184} \) Ruth Finnegan and Bimpe Olutoyin Jegeda, for example, have

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\(^{184}\) It could of course be argued that Ström was writing at a time before the field of Performance Studies had really ‘taken off,’ (although research into oral theory by Ruth Finnegan and John Miles Foley would probably have been available to him) and it is thus anachronistic to have expected Ström to have applied Performance Theory to skaldic verses. Nonetheless, there are still performative aspects in the poems’ original composition - the sounds of the words, the movement or flow of the syntax - that would have been accessible to him regardless, in addition to his (presumably) own experiences of live performance.
both examined the work and role of African praise poets, and analysed not only how the praise poet can make or break a patron’s reputation in their choice of wording, but also how sound, ceremony and audience interaction form an important part of each poet’s performance. Julia Novak and John Miles Foley have explored the modern American tradition of slam poetry in a similar way, noting how when poets compete against one-another, they regularly make use of their pitch, pace, tone, timbre, body-language, eye-contact and performance space in a bid to distinguish themselves from other poets. As such, whilst Ström’s basic argument is a convincing one, his analysis is somewhat limited as it fails to engage with the wider field of oral performance theory.

As its title suggests, Jakub Morawiec’s more recent short article ‘Characteristics of Skaldic Court Performances’ also investigates skaldic performance in the early Norwegian court. Despite the fact that Morawiec tends to take his sources at face value and that his article could perhaps go a little deeper, he nonetheless makes some interesting points. Among other things, he notes the formulaic sequential structure that characterises skaldic performance involving a call for attention, recitation, judgement and reward, all of which are features that underline the performer’s interaction with his audience. In addition, Morawiec places emphasis on the important roles that poet, patron and audience would have played during the performances:

On one hand, [the] monarch’s men were the witnesses of [the] ruler’s deeds, praised by the skald [sic] in a poem, on the other hand, they were the first to experience the growing power of the ruler, motivated by praise, properly prepared by the poet. Thus one can say, that both ruler and skald had their reasons to present a poem before the whole retinue.

Essentially, Morawiec argues that despite the poet-patron relationship, the audience were also important players in the game of skaldic court performance, as they were judging both

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188 Morawiec, ‘Characteristics of Skaldic Court Performances’, p. 44.
the patron’s reputation and the poetic skill of the skáld. Like Ström, Morawiec argues that in any analysis of the work of the skálds, it is crucial to consider the political aims, functions and motivations that lie behind the performance ‘event’. Morawiec argues: ‘[The political dynamic] should not be forgotten as praise poetry, most often presented at court before a monarch, played an important role as a very effective tool of royal propaganda.’ As Morawiec notes, there was always more than one performer involved: the king or patron also had to publically ‘act’ or play the role of judge (when judging the skáld’s performance). To his mind, the same thing applied to the audience. Morawiec uses evidence taken from saga descriptions of court performance to argue that ‘they [i.e. the retinue] can be described not only as an audience beholding a spectacle but also additional actors, with roles strictly defined.’ In short, Morawiec concludes that the poet, patron and audience members all had to be aware of their ‘strictly defined’ roles during skaldic performance, and act accordingly.

Whilst Morawiec certainly puts forward a legitimate and interesting argument, it might be said that it remains somewhat limited in terms of both attitude and approach to skaldic performance, not least because, like Ström, Morawiec makes no attempt to look at comparative living material. In fact, Morawiec seems to have a somewhat limited understanding of ‘performance’ itself. Indeed, the idea of figures playing roles such as ‘the judge’ and ‘jury’ and engaging in formal, sequentially structured behaviour is certainly valid but, like Ström’s suggestions, could be taken much further with theories commonly applied in Performance Studies such as those relating to the social game, deep play, ritual and communitas. Unfortunately, like so many others working in the field of Old Norse Studies, Morawiec only dips his toe in the waters of other relevant disciplinary fields.

In contrast to the tentative work of Ström and Morawiec, it might be said that Lisa Collinson’s unpublished PhD thesis Royal Entertainment in the Kings’ Sagas goes much further by exploring the idea of skaldic and court performance from a much more performance-orientated perspective. Collinson begins by considering the concept of skemmtan and gaman (‘entertainment’, ‘play’, ‘fun’) and leikr (‘play’) in the Norwegian royal
court as a basis for the analysis of social behaviour amongst the early Scandinavian elite.\(^{193}\)

Crucially, Collinson argues that she does not mean to conduct a historical analysis of Old Norse court entertainment, but rather analyse the literary representations of such performances as they appear in the sagas: in other words, as a product of a thirteenth-century literary culture. It is nonetheless refreshing to see how, unlike Ström and Morawiec, Collinson actively engages with theorists such as Johan Huizinga and Walter Ong, both of whom stress that the element of competition is central to the notion of play.\(^{194}\) Whereas Huizinga argues that the verbal challenge is a crucial part of social interaction and ‘play’, Ong argues that stylised quarrels such as the *flyting* or *senna* demand that performers be aware of their audience. Collinson also makes effective use of W. I. Miller’s argument that that in the sagas, it seems that the more public the performance is, the more formal or ritualised the style of presentation becomes.\(^{195}\)

The skilful application of these theories helps Collinson achieve a more interdisciplinary, performance-based approach to Old Norse court performance that goes further in examining not only the interaction between a court poet and his patron, but also the communication between the poet and his larger audience. Among other things, Collinson considers the idea of the social game, of role-play, art and entertainment alongside social interaction and communication, essentially approaching skaldic performance as an ‘event’ grounded in a specific context, in a fashion similar to the performance-orientated approaches of Foley and Baumann.\(^{196}\) All the same, although Collinson goes beyond the simple observations of Morawiec and text-based interpretations of Ström, it might be argued her thesis also adopts a somewhat literary understanding of performance. By focusing solely on the written saga’s literary *representations* of poetry performance, rather than attempting to make use of real examples of court performance (such as African praise poetry), Collinson never reaches any interpretation of how such performances might have worked in live performance, in terms of sound, sensory experience, and the influence of spatial conditions.

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\(^{193}\) Collinson, ‘Royal Entertainment in Three Kings’ Sagas Compilations’.


\(^{196}\) Collinson, ‘Royal Entertainment in Three Kings’ Saga Compilations’.
In her monograph *The Structure of Old Norse Dróttkvætt Poetry* (1995), and her article ‘On the Recitation of Old Norse Skaldic Poetry’ (1994), Kari Ellen Gade has also analysed the saga’s prose descriptions of skaldic performance. Unlike Collinson’s more social- and literary-orientated perspective of performance, however, Gade pays particular attention to the role of skaldic syntax and sound in both composition and performance. One of the main strengths of Gade’s approach in both of these studies is her refreshing consideration of the role that acoustic sound would have played in facilitating audience understanding during skaldic recitation. In contrast to earlier scholars (see Chapter 1.6), Gade argues that skaldic poetry was neither sung nor chanted, but spoken. Gade notes that in the extant literary sources the verb *syngja* (‘to sing’) was reserved solely for Church liturgy in medieval Scandinavia, whilst *kveða* (‘to speak, recite, compose’), *mæla* (‘to speak’) and *segja* (‘to say, tell, narrate’) were used by saga writers to describe the mode of skaldic recitation. As part of her overview of relevant materials, Gade carries out a survey of musical traditions in early Germanic Europe. On the basis of the lack of archaeomusicological and literary evidence for recitation to harps or other stringed instruments in Scandinavia, she concludes that the musical performance of skaldic verse was unlikely.

Following a thorough analysis of the relationship between phonetics and metrics in skaldic composition, Gade suggests that *skálds* nonetheless seem to have made use of vocal techniques such as accentuation, modulation of pitch and audible pauses as a means of conveying meaning to the listening audience during recitation. Among other things, Gade argues that the native term *hendingar* (‘internal rhyme’) in Old Norse, a word which stems from the verb *að henda* (‘to catch’), might even reflect the function of the rhymed syllables during skaldic recitation as a means of trying to ‘catch’ the ear and/or enable the listener to ‘catch’ the poem’s meaning. Gade also uses Snorri’s distinction of different sound qualities in *Háttatal* as evidence of the different vocal techniques that *skálds* might have used in performance. As Snorri says, *skálds* may have used different types of sounds (such as hard and soft) to distinguish meaning:

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201 Gade, *The Structure of Old Norse Skaldic Dróttkvætt*, p. 5.
Stafasetning greirn mál átt; en hljóðgrein er þat at hafa samstöðgur lángr, eða skammar, harðar eða linar, ok þat er setning hljóðsgreina er vær kóllum hendingar.  

(‘All meaning is distinguished by spelling, but sound is distinguished by having syllables long or short, hard or soft, and there is a rule of distinction of sound that we call rhymes.’)

In Gade’s opinion, harðar eða linar in this quotation refers to the type of accentuation placed on individual syllables, which she feels helped audibly distinguish hendingar during recitation. In a similar way, Gade suggests that the related terms fong (‘catches’) and föll (‘fall, dips’) in the following strophe probably refer to the uneven distribution of metrically marked syllables:

Ortak eina
of jarl þulu
verðat drápa
með Donum verri;
föll eru fjórtán
ok fong tiu;
opits ok ðondvert
ofugt stígandi;
svá skald yrkjja
sás illa kann.

(‘I made a ditty about an earl, no drápa could be worse among the Danes; there were fourteen dips and ten catches; it was open and reversed, moving awkwardly; thus he shall compose who is poorly skilled.’)
Gade therefore concludes that ‘skálds must have been aware of such acoustic aspects as the syllabic quality of the rhyming syllables, the flow of recitation, and the number of metrically marked and unmarked syllables in the dróttkvætt line.’

Not only does Gade demonstrate that live, acoustic sound was an important aspect during skaldic recitation, she also displays a comparatively unusual degree of sensitivity towards the skáld and his understanding of what was going on during a skaldic performance. Gade stresses that while the sagas often refer to performance, little is actually known about the ‘process’ of recitation. All the same, as she stresses, introductory phrases used by saga writers to frame skaldic performance, such as bera fram (‘to deliver’), færa fram (‘to deliver’) and flytja fram (‘to deliver, set in motion’) all seem to corroborate the idea that: ‘skálds were acutely aware of the acoustic aspects of recitation, and that they perceived the phonetic product as something concrete, as an entity with physical characteristics that could move up and down according to pre-established patterns.’

The idea that skálds envisioned their poems as moving physical entities, she argues, is supported by the use of the term ofugt stígandi (‘moving or rising awkwardly’) used in the strophe quoted above, in addition to the words forg and fóll, harðar eða linar. Like Harris’ spectrum of eddic compositional techniques (see Chapter 1.7), Gade’s analysis of saga descriptions of skaldic performance demonstrates that the process of skaldic composition and recitation cannot be reduced to a simple model. It is clear that skálds could compose their poems quickly on the spot or over a longer period of time, just as their compositions could be badly rhymed or well-composed, performed with a beautiful voice or recited by someone else (see Chapter 3.5). Gade also uses a particular episode in Vatnsdæla saga (in which the character Pórsteinn instructs his shepherd to recite verses as a means of timing how long it took for someone to open the front door of a nearby hall), alongside her formal analysis of metrical structure, to suggest that skaldic poetry would have been recited according to a standardised, fixed rhythmic pattern. Gade argues that, ‘It is likely that, as the scene in Vatnsdæla saga suggests, the recitation proceeded according to a fixed rhythm and that there indeed existed, at least in Iceland, a standard delivery of

206 Gade, The Structure of Old Norse Skaldic Dróttkvætt, p. 27.
207 Gade, The Structure of Old Norse Skaldic Dróttkvætt, p. 23.
209 For further discussion and examples of skálds reciting other skálds’ verses, see Chapter 3.5.
dróttkvætt poetry.\footnote{Gade, The Structure of Old Norse Skaldic Dróttkvætt, p. 226.} Gade’s conclusion, on the basis of the saga vocabulary used to describe performance and the strict metrical requirements of skaldic verse, is that skaldic poetry was neither sung nor accompanied by music. Instead, Gade argues that skaldic verse was performed according to a standardised pattern of recitation, which was ‘characterised by loud, clear recitation, and probably by pauses and differences in pitch, which delineated the syntax and set off syntactic breaks.’\footnote{Gade, The Structure of Old Norse Skaldic Dróttkvætt, p. 226}

Unlike the vague musings of earlier scholars and literary-based criticism of many of the more recent skaldicists, Gade’s analysis of skaldic performance is highly valuable for our understanding of skaldic poetry as live, oral performance. Gade’s examination of native terminology regarding performance and poetics is also in line with the methodologies used by oral scholars working in the fields of what are referred to as ethnopaleography or ethnopoetics, in other words, reading a poem from the viewpoint of the poet’s own tradition rather than a modern understanding.\footnote{Foley, How to Read an Oral Poem, pp. 36-7.} Although Gade never directly engages with modern oral theory (and never attempts to score an ethnopoetic reading of skaldic verse, as discussed in Chapter 1.7), as noted above, she shows a sensitivity to the skáld and his native, oral understanding of skaldic composition and the way that his poetry worked through the medium of live, acoustic sound. Furthermore, Gade’s argument that “the mode of recitation must have facilitated the understanding of dróttkvætt poems”\footnote{Gade, The Structure of Old Norse Dróttkvætt Poetry, p. 25} and her consideration of the effect that sound could have on a listening audience members could well be more important than she realises. As Gade argues:

it is likely that there existed certain norms or patterns of composition and recitation, familiar to the listener as well as the poet, which would have been anticipated and recognised by the audience and which would have facilitated the understanding of dróttkvætt poetry.\footnote{Gade, The Structure of Old Norse Dróttkvætt Poetry, p. 24.}

While Gade is well aware of the interaction between skáld and audience during live performance, it is interesting that, like many skaldicists, she appears comparatively unaware
of the current academic discussions concerning the crucial relationship between mode and meaning in poetry (see further, Chapter 2.6), which would have undoubtedly offered some significant depth – and additional support – to her valuable arguments.

In terms of her approach to the nature and function of skaldic performance, it seems clear that Gade’s examination of dróttkvætt performance could be taken further. Like earlier scholars such as Andreas Heusler and Lee M. Hollander, Gade continues to think of skaldic performance as something that only involved the mouth and ears. In fact, she never explores the possibilities of body language, gesture, atmosphere and event, all of which would have been crucial to the experience of the performance event and are sometimes implied by the saga’s literary descriptions.215 Similarly, although Gade offers important insights regarding the ‘sound’ of skaldic performance, unlike Gunnell (see Chapter 1.8) she never considers the effect that certain sounds may have had on the listening audience, and how different noises might have had to conjure up specific images in the audience’s mind, or create an acoustic experience with the power to transport the audience to another, imaginary world.216

One major criticism of Gade’s analysis, however, is that like so many literary scholars dealing with oral poetry, she still tends to approach sound – and performance – from a very text-based perspective. Gade’s systematic discussion of metrical and syntactic structure in skaldic dróttkvætt, which demonstrates that skálds were composing poetry according to traditional sound patterns (such as alliteration) that would have clearly imposed certain restrictions on creativity of the skáld, never makes any attempt to investigate the performative effect these sound patterns might have had on their audience. Gade limits her argument to stressing that these sound patterns were essentially a main structuring principle for syntactic constructions and clause arrangement in skaldic verses. Chapter titles in Gade’s book such as ‘Group II: D1-2, A2K, and C’ make it clear that her focus is on the technical aspects of composition, and that she has little concern for the creative impulses

215 See, for example, the way that Gunnell approaches the two poems Grímnismál and Eiríksmál in: Gunnell, ‘On the Dating and Nature of “Eddic Poetry”’ and Gunnell, ‘The Uses of Performance Studies for the Study of Old Norse Religion.’

216 As I argue in Chapter 2, the pounding rhythmic quality of certain verses may conjure up a ritualistic atmosphere for listeners, enhanced by references to the gods and the fact that the performer is also taking on the role of Óðinn when speaking poetry. As such, just the sound of skaldic poetry would have the power to transport the listener to a liminal space in which the boundaries between the world of the gods and the world of peoples would blur. See Chapter 2.5 for further analysis. Also see: Gunnell, ‘On the Dating and Nature of “Eddic Poetry”’; Gunnell, ‘The Belief Contexts and Performances of Völuspá’, and Gunnell, ‘The Uses of Performance Studies for the Study of Old Norse Religion.’
that lay behind the skáld’s choice of lexis, sound and imagery during both the stage of composition, and performance. Furthermore, like so many scholars, Gade makes no use of her own personal experience of the way in which live poetry performances work (such as considerations of the performer’s potential use of eye-contact or the effect that intonation, pitch and timbre might have generated) to inform her understanding of the ways in which skaldic verse might have ‘worked’. Instead, her otherwise excellent analysis focuses solely on the verbal text and its formal technical structures.

As has been noted earlier, another scholar who has examined skaldic performance in recent years is Stefanie Würth, although despite the fact that her article on the subject is entitled ‘Skaldic Verse and Performance’ (2007), it must be stated that her research barely seems to touch on the idea of skaldic poetry as live performance ‘event’. As mentioned earlier (in Chapter 1.7), Würth considers skaldic poetry to be problematic since to her mind it displays no oral characteristics and can thus be seen as being a ‘highly artificial art.’ The main point of interest that Würth raises with regards to performance is the idea that the value of skaldic art lay not so much in its literal meaning – the verbal text – but in its illocutionary function as praise poetry. Furthermore, it is worth bearing in mind Würth’s argument that it would have been almost impossible for a listening audience to follow the narrative thread or meaning of skaldic poetry, given the fragmented syntax and highly cryptic kennings of skaldic praise poetry. In her view, this ‘artificial’ literary art shares none of the features of oral poetry at all. As a result, Würth postulates that for the medieval listening audience, the value of a praise poem would have lain primarily in the skáld’s performance and the poem’s function as speech-act rather than the words themselves. In short, Würth argues that if these poems were once presented orally, the message or meaning of a poem would have been contained in its form as artistic praise rather than its verbal content.

Whilst Würth’s observation is valid and has the potential to be developed into a lively discussion, but unfortunately her approach to skaldic performance shows little attempt to engage with the phenomenon of performance itself. Although scholars of modern poetry and oral theory, such as Charles Bernstein, have also argued in favour of the materialising quality of oral poetry (see Chapter 2), Würth shows no awareness of such

217 Würth, ‘Skaldic Verse and Performance’, p. 263.
theory. What more, Würth’s discussion of ‘performance’ is almost wholly void of any consideration of the performer’s use of space, sound, body language and communicative relationship with his listening audience (which might have helped with understanding complicated texts). Unlike Gade, who at least tries engaging with sound, Würth rarely goes beyond the written page. Indeed, Würth uses the excuse that the saga texts offer only an ‘imaginative reconstruction’ of skaldic performance to argue that the ‘performance’ of skaldic poetry, if it took place anywhere, was restricted to communication between the thirteenth-century saga writer and his reading audience. In short, she envisions the performance of skaldic poetry as a wholly literary phenomenon and, as a result, her approach towards what was skaldic ‘performance’ is not only limited but thoroughly misleading: like many scholars, Würth unfortunately considers skaldic poetry as book-bound poetry, rather than a form of performance.

1.10. Creative Approaches to Old Norse Poetry

Alongside the academic articles and the bookish studies of eddic and skaldic verse, there have been a number of other more ‘creative’ approaches involving experiments with Old Norse poetry as actual live performance, especially in recent years. Although scholarship has rarely touched upon these experimental approaches (perhaps because they are not viewed as ‘serious’ academic work), they are nonetheless important for our understanding of Old Norse poetry as they work with the assumption that these poems were originally encountered in sound, time and space. Admittedly, many recent ‘dramatic’ interpretations of eddic poetry have tended less to be an attempt at reconstructing past performances than in incorporating Old Norse mythology and poetic texts into their own creative interpretations, usually with a modern ‘spin’ making them applicable to the world of modern audiences. In short, while many of these approaches essentially attempt to

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221 I would like to thank Terry Gunnell for drawing my attention to a forthcoming chapter that he is in the process of writing with Sveinn Einarsson (currently named ‘Theatre and Performance (1830-2012)’, forthcoming) on the uses of Old Nordic mythology and depictions of religion on the stage between 1830-2012. This article lists many experimental approaches to eddic poetry in the last twenty-five years or so, ranging from the dramatic performance of Ragnarök in York Minster in 1988 and the multi-media one-woman ballet Voluspá performed in Pjöðleikhusið 2009, to the interactive, audience-involved theatrical dining experience of Voluspá: A Nordic Food Expedition (Volvens spådom) performed at the Nordic House in Reykjavík 2011. Another interesting example of ‘creative’ approaches to Old Norse poetry that the authors do not mention, however, is
transform Old Norse (and mainly eddic) material into a medium that is accessible to modern contemporary audiences, these approaches nonetheless provide us with some highly useful insights into the ways in which Old Nordic poetry might have sounded – and worked – in time and space.

The medieval-inspired musical ensemble *Sequentia* offers an interesting starting point for the discussion of creative approaches to Old Norse poetry and performance. *Sequentia*, spear-headed by Benjamin Bagby of recent *Beowulf* fame, has produced two albums of eddic poetry performed to music, called *Edda: Myths from Medieval Iceland* (1996) and *The Rheingold Curse* (2001), both of which use the poem *Völuspá* as a uniting theme (following the example of the Codex Regius). The key value of these albums is that they present eddic poetry not as written words designed to be read silently by diligent students, but rather as works meant to be listened to as an acoustic experience. Certainly, listeners of the recording can pause, fast-forward and rewind the various works which were recorded individually, meaning that we are not dealing here with live oral performance in action, but more of an experimental ‘aural alternative’ to written editions of the *Edda*. Nonetheless, these recordings reflect Bagby’s belief that eddic poetry was not necessarily sung in the modern sense. Indeed, as Bagby notes, aside from the short (and somewhat dubious) example given in Benjamin de la Borde’s *Essai sur la musique ancienne et moderne* (1780), no musical scores exist for eddic poetry.

Bagby also argues, based on the arguments of scholars like Kellogg, Harris, Lönroth and Gísli Sigurðsson (building on the work of Albert Lord), that ‘it seems certain that the text of these [eddic] poems in performance was far from fixed.’ In addition, he argues that only once the poems were written down did they gain ‘a kind of stability, a clear shape, meaning that the usual

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224 Both of these works were also performed on-stage meaning that people could also experience these musical interpretations as live performance.
freedom originally granted by the oral tradition was no longer valid." This means that while Sequentia are experimenting with how eddic poetry might have sounded in the thirteenth-century when it was recorded, the ensemble is not claiming that these versions were ‘the’ works as they were originally experienced by medieval audiences.

Indeed, making use of medieval instruments like lyres and fiddles to accompany the haunting vocals of the performers, it must be remembered that Bagby and his group are adding their own creative ‘spin’ to eddic poetry in order to create a ‘medieval-sounding’ repertoire that, in terms of sound, certainly borders on the ancient and ritualistic.

Furthermore, Bagby describes how, for the first album at least, with the help of Heimir Pálsson, he deliberately chose an Old Norse pronunciation based on the orthography of the thirteenth-century manuscript texts: Bagby made no attempt to adapt these poems into a modern Icelandic pronunciation, nor to guess how ninth- or tenth-century pronunciation might have sounded. As regards the question of how the works were performed, Bagby concludes on the basis of listening to hundreds of rímur recordings in the Arnamagnean Institute in Reykjavík, that no ‘original’, fixed melodies for poetry existed in medieval Iceland.

Like the later experienced rímur singers, however, it was probable that a medieval poet might also have made use of a series of traditional acoustic elements that would have made the audience feel as if they recognised even unknown pieces when they were being performed. Bagby refers to this phenomenon as ‘modal language’ which might have been used in the composition and performance of eddic poetry, describing this as being essentially ‘a collection of gestures and signs which can be interiorised, varied, combined and used as a font to create musical texts.’ Crucially, Bagby’s methodology is not inspired by page-bound metrics or simply a voicing of the written text, but rather driven by his regard for the audience’s ear. Sequentia’s albums can thus be viewed as valuable experiments into the potential role of sound for our understanding and experience of eddic poetry. The albums’ value for Old Norse scholars lies therefore not necessarily in the result—

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228 Note, of course, Kari Ellen Gade’s article in which she argues that there is little evidence for Old Norse musical instruments or singing. See: Gade, ‘On the Recitation of Old Norse Skaldic Poetry’, pp. 127-131.
the finished recordings – but rather in its original, refreshing practical approach to eddic verse.\(^{231}\)

It is worth bearing in mind that Bagby has not limited his work to the poems of the *Edda*. Indeed, both he and *Sequentia* have worked with a wide range of medieval works. Particularly relevant here is Bagby’s solo performance of the Old English poem *Beowulf*. Although not technically of the same form or genre as eddic or skaldic poetry, the alliterative epic *Beowulf* can be said to share many similarities to Old Norse poetry. Bagby’s approach to the solo performance of this poem can thus be said to reveal a valuable perspective on oral performance. As part of a round table discussion with three key oral scholars – John Miles Foley, Mark Amido and Thomas Cable – which accompanies the DVD of a live performance of the poem, Bagby discusses the essential difference for him between reading *Beowulf* from a book and performing it in front of a live performance. Bagby argues that if he tried reading the written version of *Beowulf* aloud from the printed page, he would feel ‘trapped in the book’ and ‘chained’ by the unnaturalness of the written word. During the recorded discussion, Bagby also points out that he needs to make use of his harp, his hands, tone changes and ornamental flourishes which for him are an essential part of the performance, and not least for the audience.\(^{232}\)

As noted above, Bagby therefore agrees with Foley and others that that no performance is ever the same, and states that, like any Anglo-Saxon *scop* or Norse *skáld*, he tends to adapt his *Beowulf* performance according to his audience by lengthening or shortening certain parts in order to maintain their attention. At the end of the round-table discussion John Miles Foley praises Bagby’s performance and underlines that, in his opinion, Bagby’s work is not trying to accurately reconstruct a past performance of *Beowulf*. Instead, Foley believes that Bagby is effectively bringing the past to life (as all good performers have

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\(^{231}\) Another musical interpretation of Old Norse poetry worth noting is that of Larvrans Reimer-Møller (pseudonym) and his unpolished poetry project ‘Runeskaldr’ which was given to me in the form of a CD and printed notes (December 2013). In his description of the project, Reimer-Møller explains how the project was begun after he saw Benjamin Bagby’s performance of *Beowulf* ten years ago. Reimer-Møller then explains how he built his own lyre and set up a studio, in which he recorded a variety of skaldic poems, including: *Hialmar’s* [sic] *Death-Song*, *Biarkamol Sin Fornu* [sic], *Hisdrápa*, *Bushuboen*, *Hildebrand’s Death-Song*, *Vikarsbalker*, *Darrathalithoth* [sic], *Glymdrápa* and *Hrafningsáldur Óðins* [sic]. In addition, Reimer-Møller offers the ‘verbal text’ of the poems (in both Old Norse and modern English translation) enabling the listener to read along (or re-read) at the same time as listening (or pausing and re-winding) the acoustic recording. Although a little amateur and unpolished, Reimer-Møller’s project offers an interesting insight into the sound (if not the visual and atmospheric) elements of live skaldic performance, something that I believe should be at the forefront of modern scholarship. See Chapters 2.3-2.6 for further discussion.

\(^{232}\) For a more detailed analysis of the relationship between sound and meaning, see Chapter 2.4.
always done) by finding new and exciting ways to engage with a modern twenty-first century audience (just as the ‘original’ performers would have done in the early Middle Ages).

Another artist to approach eddic performance from a musical perspective, albeit with a notably more modern twist than Bagby and Sequentia’s medieval-inspired ensemble, is the rock musician and poet Julian Cope. As part of a talk given at the British Museum in 2001, Cope performed six spoken-word tracks that he later turned into an album called Discover Odin (2001). The album comprises of songs inspired by Norse mythology including The 18 Charms of Odin, in which Cope half-sings, half-speaks the eddic poem Hávamál (‘Sayings of the High One’) in English translation to musical accompaniment. Unlike Sequentia, however, Cope makes no attempt to incorporate any medieval elements into the musical mixture: with his droning Liverpudlian accent, electronic guitar and synthesised sound effects, Cope’s 18 Charms of Odin sounds more like a grungey punk piece fused with the underground occult. There is no question that this modern ‘rock’ re-make of Hávamál could not be further removed from the ‘original’ eddic poem that scholars usually encounter in their books.

Nonetheless, it might also be argued that Cope’s version of the eddic poem Hávamál is still closer to its oral medieval counterpart than the silent, written versions of the poem because it at least underlines the element of sound. The fact that Cope performs in English certainly means that the content or meaning of the poem is accessible to non-Icelandic speaking audience members, unlike Sequentia’s versions of eddic poetry in which contemporary English-speaking audiences only gain the sound of Old Norse, and not its literal meaning. Although Cope’s use of electric guitars, language choice and performance ‘space’ are obviously completely different to ‘original’ performances of Old Norse poetry that would have been experienced in Viking Age mead-halls, the use of English at least means that the modern audience might experience what it felt like to hear (and understand) a performer – stepping into the role of Óðinn – speak about elves, gods, runes and charms. In short, even with its modern experimental instrumentation, Cope’s musical interpretation of Hávamál offers a valuable perspective for scholars interested in investigating the

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phenomenon of Old Norse performance as it at least allows them to put themselves in the position of not only a listening, watching audience, but also a comprehending one.

Another interesting approach to Old Norse poetry in recent years takes the form of an audio resource that is currently being run by BBC School Radio. Designed for classroom use, the BBC Radio Programme Viking Saga Songs is accompanied by an interactive website with downloads and podcasts designed to help teachers and students to learn about Old Norse mythology in a musical, performative way. The programme encourages children (via their teacher) to learn songs inspired by characters such as Thor (Þórr), Loki and Odin (Óðinn), by making use of a variety of additional elements such as rhythm, percussion, singing, vocal exercises, physical movement, eye-contact, scales, and a whole host of other skills. The programme is divided into ten ‘lessons’ that each focus on a different theme. The first session, for example, is called Loki the Joker. Most refreshing of all is that the lesson-plan (downloadable online) reveals a completely performance-based perspective (as suggested above). Among other things, students are encouraged to warm-up, practice the correct standing position, maintain eye-contact with their peers and even sing different Norse-themed ditties to jazz rhythms and popular melodies.

Of course, in terms of ‘historical accuracy’ the programme is completely unscholarly, for logical reasons: it is highly unlikely that primary-school children would be concerned with the intricacies of Old Norse manuscripts and the dróttkvætt metre. What this programme does do, however, is bring Old Norse poetry and performance to life by putting it into a creative, interactive classroom setting, underlining if nothing else that these were works that were performed and experienced. The programme description underlines the aims: ‘the songs explore the atmosphere and excitement of a Viking sound-world from over a thousand years ago, while being rooted in familiar modern styles that the children will relate to, such as reggae, rock, and lyrical contemporary ballads.’ Of course, like the works noted above, the programme makes no attempt to actively reconstruct past performances, nor is Old Norse mythology really its focus. Ultimately, the programme aims to present Old Norse mythological material in a simplified, accessible form, as a means of

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235 Teachers’ Notes, BBC Viking Saga Songs, p. 2. (online PDF). Both the aim of the programme and the planned structure of lessons are available to download here: BBC School Radio Downloads, [http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/schoolradio/pdfs/viking_saga_songs_online.pdf](http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/schoolradio/pdfs/viking_saga_songs_online.pdf) (viewed 25 November, 2014).
teaching and engaging children in creative performance, simultaneously underlining for them that creative sound performance was a central feature of the original works.

The examples that have been discussed above demonstrate a range of non-academic approaches to Old Norse poetry, ranging from medieval musical ensembles and electronic rock to children’s classroom activities, showing that in recent years a growing creative hub of Norse-inspired activity has been emerging parallel to more conventional scholarship. Whilst such approaches are interesting, engaging and often insightful for our understanding and appreciation of Old Norse performance in general, so far most interpretations have focused only on eddic poems: interestingly enough, up until this point in time, skaldic poetry has been somewhat marginalised. One noticeable exception is the AHRC-funded project *Modern Poets on Viking Poetry* (2013-ongoing) and its sister project *Kennings in the Community* (2013-ongoing), co-ordinated by Dr. Debbie Potts at the University of Cambridge. According to the project’s website, the aim of *Modern Poets on Viking Poetry* is: ‘to extend the skaldic aesthetic into the creative consciousness of contemporary poets, nurturing a dialogue between academic research and modern poetic practice through the collaborative cultural translation of skaldic poetry.’

Essentially, the project involves helping poets to ‘translate’ skaldic poems into a modern, contemporary form by bridging the gap between Old Norse scholarship and modern poetry. Similarly, *Kennings in the Community* in particular fosters conversation between scholars and poets with a specific focus on kennings (*kenningar*), providing: ‘a resource for teachers, poets and any interested members of the public who want to learn about the scope for the use of kennings as a stimulus of poetic activity.’ Furthermore, the project: ‘explores the ways in which this medieval poetic device [i.e. the kenning] may be adapted to accommodate the mind-set of individuals within our contemporary cultural community.’ It has achieved this by holding a variety of creative writing workshops run by Debbie Potts and modern poets, including Lucy Hamilton, Emma Hammond and Jane Monson, in Cambridge and London during April 2013.

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237 See *Kennings in the Community* website (link given above).
Both skaldic poetry projects have produced some interesting and informative results: *An Anthology of Responses to Skaldic Poetry* (2013) represents a variety of creative interpretations of skaldic verses by several of the modern poets involved in the project, many of these poems coming about as a result of the interactive poetry workshops run by Potts and her team of poets. Emma Hammond, for example, gave a workshop entitled *How to Write like a Viking Warrior* in which she gave participants various images, such as a kitten and a washing machine, and asked them to write kennings for each image before linking them together to create a full story or poem. Lucy Hamilton similarly involved participants in a very ‘hands-on’ approach to kennings, first by matching up Old Norse kennings (and English translations) with their referents via a process of cutting and sticking, then helping them to generate kennings for everything from gnomes and hares to igloos and giraffes. Most important for the present discussion is the way in which both projects have extended beyond the written word and strayed into the spoken and visual. Alistair Cook’s film-poem, for example, fuses a black-and-white video recording of soldiers at war with his reading of John Glenday’s *The Lost Boy* poem, which is itself based on Egill Skallagrímsson’s *Sonatorrek* (*Loss of Sons*). At the same time, the various poets involved in the project had the opportunity to showcase their work (published in the *Anthology*) by reading aloud their poems at a poetry event organised by Potts in Cambridge in April 2013, thereby experiencing how their work functioned in a live setting (somewhat like the *skálds* of the Middle Ages).

While the main aim of the projects’ approaches to skaldic verse are to nurture a discourse between scholars and poets, it is clear that it has also ventured into the fields of context, sound and performance. Whilst Potts’ project still remains largely focused on words rather than action and atmosphere (which are both part of performance), its real strength for Old Norse scholars is that it underlines that skaldic poetry was part of a creative, poetic process, which involved considerations of audience reactions, as much as it involved words, sounds and rhythm. Certainly, as with Cope’s performances and the BBC Radio Programme, this project did not involve the original language. Nonetheless, like all of the above, it has

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239 For more information, see: *Modern Poets on Viking Poetry* and *Kennings in the Community* online.

involved an attempt to approach Old Norse poetry from a new perspective that involves trying to translate the original ‘experience’ of poetry into modern terms, and finding ways that will allow a modern audience to get a sense of what it might have been like to experience these works a thousand years ago. One hopes to see Potts continue with her exciting project, pushing it still further into the realms of spoken-word or performance poetry – perhaps a ‘skaldic slam?’ – in order to really expand both modern scholars and modern poets’ understanding of what it originally meant to compose, perform and experience skaldic verse in a live setting rather than merely on the silent page.
CHAPTER 2. PERFORMANCE POETRY: PRACTICE AND THEORY

2.1. An example of Performance Poetry

Kate Tempest’s *Brand New Ancients* is all about sound: half-spoken, half-sung, Tempest’s spoken-word poetry is performed over a live instrumental score, oscillating between rap and song, heightened rhythmic speech and urban slang.\(^{241}\) Live at the Battersea Arts Centre in London, Tempest performs her Award-winning *Brand New Ancients* (2013), an epic ballad in oral format that tells the story of ‘everyday gods’ in London’s south-end. As she steps up to the microphone and looks out across the silent audience, the anticipation in room is palpable. Speaking her opening lines, Tempest’s south-London accent echoes out across the stage, filling up the room as it pours directly into her listener’s ears:

> \ldots these are everyday odysseys  
> we have dreams, we make decisions  
> the stories are there if you listen  
> the stories are here  
> the stories are you  
> and your fear, and your hope  
> is as old as the language of smoke  
> you know, the language of blood  
> the language of languishing love  
> the gods are all here  
> because the gods are in us.\(^{242}\)

Tempest is dressed in plain clothes and wearing little make-up; her blonde hair is unruly and there is nothing on stage except for a microphone. In fact, there is a distinct lack of

\(^{241}\) Kate Tempest is, among other things, known for her work as a performance poet or spoken-word artist. To read about or view more of Tempest’s work, see online: *Kate Tempest*, [http://katetempest.co.uk/projects](http://katetempest.co.uk/projects) (viewed 25 November, 2014).

\(^{242}\) The opening clip of Kate Tempest’s *Brand New Ancients* (2014) is available to watch online: *YouTube*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JLWIB3ib7ZM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JLWIB3ib7ZM). The verbal text (and subsequent references to Tempest’s verbal text, below) is my own transcription of Tempest’s performance, following my viewing of the YouTube clip (above).
spectacle concerning Kate Tempest’s performance. There is no superfluous visual, no
colourful and crowded scenery: instead, all focus is on the performer. Tempest’s stage-
presence is captivating and energetic, drawing the listener in as she paints colourful images
with her gritty and compelling voice. Tempest’s voice is perhaps the most striking aspect of
her performance. Rather than the dull monotones of many traditional poetry readings,
Tempest speaks in a highly stylised, irregular *isochronic*243 rhythm that in turn forms an
acoustic pulse, an audible beat against the instrumental backdrop. Her introductory lines
are slow and measured, frequently stressing un-stressed syllables via a slight raising of pitch
or tonal change; she almost sings the line: ‘We have dreams, we make decisions,’ so that it
cascades musically off her tongue. In startling contrast to her slow lyrical opening, however,
half-way in to her performance Tempest unexpectedly engages a complete rhythmic switch
and rapid increase in tempo. Following a dramatic pause, a loud beat abruptly starts to play
in the background and Tempest launches into action with a fast-paced, regular rhythm:

The gods are in the betting shops
the gods are in the caf
the gods are smoking fags out the back.
The gods are in the office block
the gods are at their desk
the gods are giving more and getting less.

In contrast to her dramatic introduction, which corresponds with the poem’s ballad-like
nature and Tempest’s almost ‘bardic’ status as the poetic messenger of modern mythology,
it is during this rhythmic switch that poet-performer Kate Tempest transforms yet again
before the audience’s eyes, this time stepping into the role of a pseudo-rapper.

Whilst sound is at the core of Tempest’s performance, its function extends far
beyond that of simply giving voice to a written a ‘text’. Instead, sound is a crucial tool that

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243 *Isochrony* is a term used by Julia Novak and Charles Bernstein to describe the unwritten ‘beat’ in an orally
performed poem. Charles Bernstein uses the term *isochronic* to describe an audible rhythm or beat that is
irregular (i.e. the listener cannot ‘tap their foot’ along to the beat as they would with, for example, a limerick or
iambic pentameter). Bensteins describes how an isochronic rhythm is usually the result of stresses that are
spaced out over long temporal intervals due to slow delivery, and is common in both British and American
spoken-word performances, particularly at slam contests. For a more thorough discussion, see section 2.3, or
Tempest uses to both generate and invoke different levels of meaning during her performance. It is through her highly stylised utilisation of language, with its irregular stresses, half-rhymed sound-play, flowing articulation and vivid imagery, that she creates a heightened poetic register distinctly separate from everyday speech. It is through the ‘sound’ of poetry, then, that Tempest metacommunicatively signals a new ‘context’ to those present, as she invites them to step into the role of audience and enter into the fictive space of the performance, a ‘double-reality’ that is clearly marked out as both above and beyond ordinary reality.

If Tempest invites the audience to listen, to enter the acoustic space of her performance-poem, then she also invites them to enter the spaces of the visual and symbolic. Eyes shut, her body swaying, Tempest’s use of action, gesture and facial expression are crucial aspects of her performance. There is an element of play, a freedom of expression as Tempest moves her hand up and down to the rhythm: she is the flow of her performance, lost in her role as poet-performer and inhabiting a kind of ‘second reality’. Physically elevated above her audience, Tempest takes on a semi-divine status as she calls the gods into the liminal sphere, her voice almost chant-like as she utters: ‘the gods are all here,’ whilst opening her arms in a pseudo-ritualistic gesture. At the same time, Tempest also provides moments of closeness with the audience. Using the deitic words ‘here’ and ‘you’ Tempest opens her eyes, looks directly out to the audience and gestures around herself, bringing those present directly into the same, liminal space: the world of the ancients and the world of the audience blur, as Tempest’s performance establishes a distinct connection between gods, audience and performer, and all imagined boundaries subsequently collapse.

Kate Tempest’s performance of Brand New Ancients is something very different within the modern poetry world – she actively blurs the boundaries between poetry, rap, storytelling, music, and ancient ballads. Tempest is breaking down all boundaries and borders, blending theatre and poetry, as she creates liminal spaces and provides a vibrant, live, and sensory experience for the audience. Interestingly, however, Brand New Ancients is considered a performance ‘poem’, yet it defies what many scholars in the western world

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244 The idea of performance invoking different levels of play, ritual and game with clearly marked borders and boundaries separate from reality is a central aspect of ‘Performance Studies’ theory, outlined most thoroughly in Schechner, R., Performance Studies: An Introduction (London, 2002). Performance theory will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 3.
consider as poetry. It does not consist of silent symbols fixed to a page, nor is it even a poetry ‘reading’ of a text – this is poetry in action, this is poetry as live *performance*. Poetic meaning is not only created and communicated through a complex interplay of sound and action, staging and spectator-performer relationship, but is dependent on a combination of performance-specific circumstances: location, audience, mood, time and atmosphere all create a specific performance context that can never be re-captured nor re-created. More importantly, all of these details are lost when Tempest’s performance is ‘transcribed’ by the pen and reduced to a written text that subsequently calls into question: what exactly is a performance poem, and how do we analyse it after it has been reduced to silent symbols on the page?

### 2.2. What is a (Performance) Poem?

A poem is sound. A poem is space. Whether on the page or stage, poetry occupies a liminal space that is separate from ordinary language and life. Full of rhyme, rhythm and intricately crafted imagery, poetry functions as heightened and highly artificial speech: a type of ‘verbal art’ that operates beyond ordinary communication and requires a complete cognitive shift in the reader or listener’s interpretive stance.²⁴⁵ Despite Western scholarship’s obsession with the written word,²⁴⁶ poetry is not confined to one form or style but in fact manifests itself in a myriad of colourful guises: as the penned sonnets of Wordsworth and romantic lyricism of Tennyson; Sarah Kay’s coffee-shop ‘slams’; Homer’s ancient oral ballads; Maggie O’Sullivan’s experimental non-linear visual poetry;²⁴⁷ as Nigerian oral praise-poetry; poetry printed on buses²⁴⁸ or children’s dinner plates;²⁴⁹ as the work of medieval French troubadours; multi-media film poems;²⁵⁰ Tibetan prayer-singers;²⁵¹ the catchy rhythm of 1950’s beat poetry and the Liverpool Scene; as old Galician chants; as

²⁴⁵ As the language of poetry is separate from everyday speech, it requires a completely different mode of interpretation by those listening or reading. This will be discussed in more detail below (Chapters 2.3-2.4).
²⁴⁷ See below, Chapter 2.6.
²⁴⁸ *Ljóð í leiðinini* (2013-14) was an experimental poetry project in Iceland that posted poetry in public places, such as at bus stops and in cafés.
²⁵⁰ For example, Alastair Cook’s film-poem *Sonatorrek (Loss of Sons)*, which is available to view online: Vimeo, [http://vimeo.com/64046828](http://vimeo.com/64046828) (viewed 25 November, 2014).
eulogies, limericks, haiku and rap; as poems read at funerals, in classrooms, or on YouTube; and, as is the focus of this dissertation, as Old Norse pre-Christian skaldic verse.

Poetry thus exists within a broad spectrum of expressive, communicative activity that appears to vary wildly in form and style. Whilst poetry is characterised perhaps more by diversity than uniformity, all poems share certain key characteristics. Whether a live performance or page-poem, poetry offers its audience a window or ‘frame’, a different way of seeing the world, as it takes an idea, moment or mood out of its ordinary context and places it firmly in the sphere of the figurative and symbolic. Poetry is, as Richard Bauman argues: ‘a specifically marked, artful way of speaking that sets up or represents a special interpretive frame within which the act of speaking is to be understood,’ and the performance of poetry, or the physical articulation of verbal art: ‘puts the act of speaking on display - objectifies it, lifts it up to a degree from its interactional setting and opens it to scrutiny by an audience.’ Through its elevated diction, stylised syntax and non-naturalistic imagery, all poetry thus speaks its own language. As a poetic register that can encode an entire cultural outlook or belief system, poetry is dependent on its audience’s ability to step into the poetic mind-frame and ‘decode’ its keys and signals. Understanding the nationalistic, emotional sentiments of nineteenth-century Romanticism, the classroom politics of high-school slam or, perhaps more importantly, the complex kenning system used by Scandinavian skálds, all depend on the audience’s ability to scrutinise, interpret and engage with a specific poetic tradition framed by a particular way of speaking.

What defines a ‘performance’ poem, then, is neither style nor content but its basic existence as live performance. Whereas written poetry exists only as a printed text, a performance poem finds expression in a whole host of different modes: through voice and visual, non-verbal sounds and silent gestures, physical setting and performance context. Of course, sound is at the centre of performance poetry as it is any poem. As the previous Poet Laureate Gillian Clarke explains in an interview on BBC Radio 4, poetry has an intrinsic relationship to music: ‘The [quatrain] pattern of course is the tune. There no such thing as poetry which has no music; it is not poetry if it has no music.’ Yet a page-poem, even if

252 Baumann, Verbal Art as Performance, p. 73. My italics.
253 Baumann, Verbal Art as Performance, p. 73. My italics.
254 The idea of ‘keys’ and ‘signals’ being useful tools to ‘decode’ and interpret a poem (or ‘poetic language’) is proposed by Richard Bauman and discussed by John Miles Foley. See: Bauman, Verbal Art as Performance, pp. 15-24 and Foley, How to Read an Oral Poem, pp. 84-92.
bursting with the noise and hum of alliteration, rhyme and a pounding metrical pulse, is primarily a silent object whose existence resides in the visual – the ‘seeing’ and ‘reading’ a poem; any sound is spoken by the evoked or imagined poetic voice within the poem, and ‘heard’ in the silent reader’s mind. In contrast, however, an oral poem only exists as sound: it is live, physical speech, and as such depends on the performer to voice its delivery.

A performance poem is not, however, simply the vocalisation of a written poem unlike the common mode of many twenty-first century poetry readings. A performance poem goes beyond the ‘verbal’ text (what Charles Bernstein refers to as the ‘audiotext’), involving instead a complex interaction between performer, audience, setting and space. It is thus the performer, and not the poem, that is at the heart of oral poetry – the vehicle that gives voice to an oral poem and drives it forward. As a result, oral poetry cannot exist as silent symbols on paper and thus must necessarily be performed. As Ruth Finnegan succinctly puts it: ‘oral poetry does indeed, like written literature, possess a verbal text. But in one respect it is different: a piece of oral literature, to reach its full actualisation, must be performed. The text alone cannot constitute the oral poem.’ Indeed, it is the overwhelming consensus of oral scholars that an oral poem is, in its most basic form, performance. John Miles Foley argues that all oral poetry is in fact live performance and, as such: ‘oral poetry demands an audience. It isn’t complete without one.’ Julia Novak, a scholar of modern performance poetry, not only agrees with Foley and Finnegan’s assertion, but also offers an increasingly more refined definition of what she calls ‘live’ poetry: ‘live poetry is [...] defined as a specific manifestation of poetry’s oral mode of realisation that is characterised by the direct encounter of the poet with a live audience.’

For skálds composing and transmitting their verse in a pre-literate oral period, it seems fair to suggest that the term live poetry or performance poetry can also be added to the critical terminology of Norse scholarship when discussing pre-Christian skaldic verse. Skaldic performance, in an era without pen and paper, would hardly have been like the dry poetry readings of today but would have been performed without the poet’s nose in a book.

256 Novak, Live Poetry, pp. 13-14; p. 177; p. 186.
257 Bernstein defines the audiotext as the ‘audible acoustic text of the poem’, or, in other words, what is both orally articulated and ‘heard’ during the live poetry reading. See: Bernstein, ‘Introduction’, p. 12.
258 Finnegan, Oral Poetry, p. 28. My italics.
259 Foley, How to Read an Oral Poem, p. 1.
and thus characterised by live interaction between the audience and skáld.\textsuperscript{261} In contrast to Charles Bernstein, who views the poem and not the poet at the centre of the modern poetry reading’s ‘performance’,\textsuperscript{262} Julia Novak stresses the skill and personality of the poet-performer as integral to the poem; as suggested above, it is the performer who drives the oral poem and gives it meaning. In fact, as Walter Ong argues, an orally performed poem cannot help being given colour by its speaker, as: ‘in oral speech, a word must have one or another intonation or tone of voice - lively, excited, quieted, incensed, resigned or whatever. \textit{It is impossible to speak orally without intonation.}\textsuperscript{263}

Moreover, a performer does not only use his or her vocal skills (including non-verbal elements, such as a groan or pause) to breathe life into a poem, but regularly uses movement and physical gesture too. As Walter Ong again notes: ‘the oral word [...] never exists simply in a verbal context, as a written word does. Spoken words are always modifications of total, existential situation, which always engages the body.’\textsuperscript{264} As the example of Kate Tempest’s \textit{Brand New Ancients} demonstrates, the repetitive beat of a hand, nod of the head or arms stretched out before the audience are all part of the visual experience of a poem that not only offer the simple pleasure of three-dimensional aesthetic entertainment, but function as important metacommunicative signals that aid meaning and facilitate audience understanding. It is not inconceivable that a skáld, stepping forward to salute his patron or scrutinising a shield in front of him might not make similar hand gestures whilst maintaining eye contact with his audience.

Although the performer is a crucial ingredient in live poetry, other components also lend oral performance flavour. Performance Studies theorist Richard Schechner claims, ‘no performance is an island’ and, as such, no oral performance can exist outside of its context.\textsuperscript{265} Oral poetry is in a sense a \textit{happening}, an artistic \textit{event} that is bounded by external circumstances such as atmosphere, mood, time and location.\textsuperscript{266} Ruth Finnegan argues that, given the elevated and highly artificial nature of poetic speech, an oral poem is likely: ‘to be delivered in a manner and mood which sets it apart from everyday speech and

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\textsuperscript{261} For further discussion, see Chapter 3.
\textsuperscript{264} Ong, \textit{Orality and Literacy}, p. 28.
\textsuperscript{265} Schechner, \textit{Performance Studies}, p. 244.
\textsuperscript{266} A \textit{happening} is a term coined by American artist Allan Kaprow (1927-2006) to describe a one-off event or actions that, when broken down, seem to be made up of various ‘previously done’ or ‘restored’ behaviour. For further discussion, see: Schechner, \textit{Performance Studies}, p.29.
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prose utterance." This separation from the ordinary, the suspension of reality and element of poetic ‘make belief’ means that in oral poetry there is, as Finnegan argues, ‘[...] the atmosphere of ‘play’ rather than reality, an activity set apart from “real life.”’ Through the performer and performer-audience interaction it is possible to produce fictional spaces and shifting contexts within the poem itself. Terry Gunnell notes that in performance, ‘the performer is engaged with the momentary creation of an alternative world within this one [...] something that belongs in a different time or space.’

Like any performance, poetic or prose, these fictional spaces nonetheless dissolve once the performance ends: they have no life or boundaries beyond the performance space. It is for this reason that oral poetry suffers the tragic fate of transience that most written poems do not. Unlike written symbols that remain fixed firmly to the page, sound, as Walter Ong notes, ‘only exists when it is going out of existence.’ The same can be said for body-movement, facial expressions, audience interaction and the time, place and atmosphere of an oral performance: even if an oral performance is documented on film, it cannot provide the ‘original’ experience, cannot recreate the smell or atmosphere for a TV viewer as it can for those who were actually present. As Pete Middleton thus concludes: ‘live poetry readings are clearly bounded in space and time. Miss a line and it is gone; there is no rewind.’

Although Middleton is of course talking about poetry readings, his observation nonetheless applies to oral poetry or performance as neither exist beyond the moment, and both belong to the ‘here and now’. Finnegan similarly argues that it is impossible to re-capture or re-create the same performance, even if the verbal text itself remains the same. After conducting her own extensive fieldwork and considering the research of others, Ruth Finnegan’s observations of various oral-poetic cultures, including Inuit and Somali, has lead her to the somewhat obvious but nonetheless important conclusion that: ‘differently performed, or performed at a different time or to a different audience by a different singer,

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267 Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, p. 25
270 Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p.32. Ong offers the interesting example of saying the word *permanence*; as soon as -ence is uttered, perma- has already disappeared.
271 Middleton, ‘How To Read a Reading of a Written Poem’, p. 17.
it is a different poem. An oral poem thus only exists as ‘event’, as live performance that cannot be pinned down or fixed to the page. Oral poetry thus belongs, as Foley states: ‘beyond the edge of any page and outside the covers of any book’ and cannot be confined to one time or place. As Finnegan concludes: ‘in this sense, an oral poem is essentially an ephemeral work of art and has no continuity or existence apart from its performance.

Given the lack of stability in a live oral performance (in the sense that no two performances are ever the same), a performance poem is thus less defined by its text than it is its context. Unlike the identical pages of book-bound, mass-produced written poetry, an oral poem is a live ‘event’. As a result poetry is both dependent on, and characterised by, a unique set of performance-specific variables, ranging from natural lighting to technical mishaps; whether the performance arena is cramped or spacious; whether the audience includes screaming children or conservative grandparents; the mental state of the performer; a forgotten line; a renegade hiccup; after-supper lethargy; or any minor detail that serves to differentiate one performance from another. Hearing the Lord’s Prayer recited at Church would, for example, prove a very different experience than hearing it slurred drunkenly in the pub, as would performing a crude limerick at a funeral or reciting Shakespeare at a rap contest. When analysing a performance poem, then, Finnegan argues that: ‘[we] must remember the circumstances of performance of a piece - this is not a secondary or peripheral matter, but integral to the identity of a poem.

In fact, Foley argues that it is impossible even to talk about an oral ‘poem’ as this presupposes the idea that it is something complete, a freestanding item that exists in the acoustic ether just as a written poem fits neatly on the page. Instead, Foley argues that a poem is not detachable but dependent on its context, something that Terry Gunnell has often quoted when referring to the scholarly treatment of eddic poetry:

any oral poem, like any utterance, is profoundly contingent on its context. To assume that it is detachable - that we can comfortably speak of “an oral poem” as a freestanding item - is necessarily to take it out of context. And what is that lost

\(^{272}\) Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, p. 28.
\(^{274}\) Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, p. 28.
\(^{275}\) Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, p. 28.
\(^{276}\) Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem*, p. 60.
context? It is the performance, the audience, the poet, the music, the specialized way of speaking, the gestures, the costuming, the visual aids, the occasion, the ritual, the myriad of other aspects of the poem’s reality. To put the matter as directly as possible, an oral poem’s context is nothing more or less than its language, most fundamentally and inclusively construed. And when we pry open an oral poem and insert it into another, things will inevitably change. We’ll pay a price.277

An interesting example demonstrating the importance of performance context, which Foley argues is so integral to an oral poem, is taken from my own fieldwork. The following three examples all involve my own personal experience of listening to and watching live oral performances of rímur in Iceland during my stay there (2012-2014), all of which took place in drastically different circumstances. Rímur, a type of half-sung half-chanted ballad, are specific to Iceland and thought to have origins in the medieval period with possible roots in skaldic verse that soon fused with European dance ballads and fashionable metres.278

Having only known a little about rímur purely through my research into Old Norse poetry, my first encounter of rímur singing took place at an Icelandic story-telling event. The event was organised by Sagnarþúlafélag (‘Story-telling society’) and took place in a small, cordoned off section of a Viking-themed pub in Reykjavík’s neighbouring town Hafnarfjörður. Informal, friendly and relaxed, the aim of the evening was for local Icelanders to get together - a social ‘happening’ or ‘event’ - and perform short stories for one another. Most of the group seemed to know one another, and there was a lot of laughter and gossip both in the lead-up to and after-math of each performance. There was a small performance space at the front of the room, clearly marked out as separate from the rest of the audience, and performers took it in turns to jump up and occupy the spot. Half-way through the evening a small, mousy woman dressed in jeans and a smart jumper stood up shyly and waited for the group to fall silent. Her head remained lowered and she refused to make eye contact but, after a hesitant pause, she began to chant rímur in a soft, high-pitched voice. The result of her ethereal tone and closed body language created a haunting, almost detached experience as her voice filled the room and reverberated off the old wooden

277 Foley, How to Read an Oral Poem, p. 60.
beams. The entire dynamic of the previously chattering room had changed completely. All focus was on this strange, timid woman and everything was silent except for her shrill, melodious tone that continued as if on a loop: it was almost as if I had entered into something sacred, something bordering on ritual and the supernatural.

My second encounter of rimur chanting was at the open-air museum Árbæjarsafn, also just outside of Reykjavík. I was greeted by a museum employee dressed in old-fashioned costume who was clearly absorbed in her role as she chattered to bewildered tourists in a torrent of colloquial, rural Icelandic, pretending to be a farmer’s wife as she sighed and batted us away impatiently. Unlike the experience in Hafnarfjörður where the audience’s separation from the performer was enhanced by the performer’s own detached delivery, there was certainly an element of ‘make belief’ in Árbæjarsafn as I was drawn into the performance, being bustled around and becoming part of the action. As the group was ushered upstairs into an old, eighteenth-century bedroom I was confronted by another group of performers, also dressed in traditional Icelandic costumes, but this time found to be squinting in the candle-light, carding wool and chanting rimur, pretending to be quite oblivious to our voyeuristic presence. Of course, this was all part of the performance and Árbæjarsafn’s desire to ‘re-create’ an authentic Icelandic kvöldvaka (‘wake’ or ‘evening reading’) and it certainly worked. Although I had consciously stepped into the role of audience member in Hafnarfjörður, no costumes were worn and, as conscious recitation (presenting the ‘self’ not a ‘persona’), the performance had been rooted very much in twenty-first century reality. In Árbæjarsafn, however, the performer’s traditional costume, the dimly lit attic bedroom, the cold winter’s evening and candle-lit wool-work meant that my experience of rimur chanting had this time a curious element of ‘make belief’, as I stepped out of the ordinary and was transported into the world of eighteenth-century rimur-chanting tradition.

My final experience of rimur could not have found a more different context than the spontaneous outburst of a bondi (farmer) to a jarnamaður (farrier) whilst I was working on a horse farm (Grytubakki) one summer in the north of Iceland. The day was hot, the sun was bright and I was helping to shoe the riding horses when Stebbi, the farmer, suddenly turned to his colleague Tryggvi and bellowed a verse of rimur. Dressed in shabby work clothes that were covered in oil and muck, Stebbi began chanting in a booming, over-the-top tenor whilst using his hammer to create a beat and grinning manically, in a bid to create
deliberate humour. While the horse may have not been amused to have its hoof turned into a metronome, my own experience of this rimur performance was much more ‘entertaining’ than the performances at Hafnarfjörður and Abæjasafn. Unlike these performances, Stebbi was conscious of his performance and made no attempt to engage in ‘make belief’ or step into the role of serious, sober recitation. Stebbi’s aim was solely to amuse, adopting the persona of rimur-chanting Icelandic farmer as a tool to create mock-parody and present a comic image of himself.

All three performances of rimur took place in completely different contexts and, as a result, produced drastically different experiences. The performance space varied from an informal pub and re-created eighteenth-century Icelandic bedroom to a modern-day horse-yard; performers ranged from a small, shy woman and a boisterous farmer, to an ensemble of costumed ‘actors’. One performance took place in the evening, another in the depths of winter and the final one during the heights of summer; the audience varied from local Icelanders and bewildered tourists to just myself. In fact, the performance contexts not only provided different experiences but were essential to my understanding of the ‘event’: as I am not a fluent Icelandic speaker, I was only able to glimpse snatches of literal ‘meaning’ from the verbal text, so instead my focus was on the visual aspects of the performers, the atmosphere of the location, and the acoustic experience and musical, droning sound of the rimur itself.

When I later tried to read rimur written on the page, however (the book providing yet again another very different performance context), I found that the experience was quite different from my three previous experiences of live performance; it was certainly far less engaging and enjoyable. Whilst reading rimur, most of my experience involved attempting to decode the literal meaning of the words engraved so resolutely on to the page, and I invested so much energy into working out the gist of the text that I was unwittingly forced to ignore any artistic value encapsulated within the poem. Furthermore, as silent page-poetry I was unable to enjoy the experience of rimur performance, unable to hear the sound or experience the musicality and ‘feel’ of a poem. My own personal experience of Icelandic rimur thus proves that not only is the experience of live poetry performance markedly different to that of a written poem, but the experience of a poem (its sight, sound and setting) is intrinsic to a poem’s meaning. I understood more from the
haunting, off-key tones of the mousey woman in Hafnarfjörður and the laughing tones of bóni Stebbi than I gained from the indecipherable Icelandic words sulking silently on paper. As the above three examples of live rímur performance demonstrate, an oral poem, like any oral performance is overwhelmingly defined by its surrounding context and its performance-specific conditions. It is thus highly questionable whether it is productive to force a literary mould, like that found in written poetry, on to oral poetry in a bid to seek a fixed verbal ‘text’ as an oral poem is clearly characterised by its ‘liveness’ and fluidity, and not least its inability to remain fixed to one spot for any longer than it takes to articulate. As I have stressed above, a performance poem is thus not a static object but rather a transient experience, dependent on a variety of changing circumstances that nonetheless always contain a performer, audience and sound: this means that it can be seen in many ways a greater, more powerful work of art than a written poem. As Foley argues: ‘spoken words have power that even the most finely crafted manuscripts and most accessible mass-market paperbacks can’t match.’279 It is thus perhaps more productive when analysing oral poetry to consider each performance as a unique occurrence, even when a poem might have been learnt by heart and ‘re-performed’ in new circumstances. When analysing oral poetry, we should thus endeavour to interpret the multiplicity of performance-specific influences, factors and circumstances that surround a poem’s performance; essentially, we should try to consider the oral poem’s functioning context and not just its verbal text.

The dominance of western literary criticism, which routinely finds itself at the heart of skaldic scholarship, nonetheless means that value is more often placed on the written word, while the element of live performance is often ignored or relegated to the margins. Even when literary scholars do attempt to analyse such performance poetry, their analysis tends to focus on the prosody of page-poetry. Scholars scrutinise metrics and metaphors in addition to the ‘imagined’ or ‘evoked’ poetic voice (as opposed to the live performer’s actual speaking voice), on the basis of the sound of the alliteration being ‘heard’ in the silent reader’s mind rather than its physical articulation experienced when spoken aloud. In the same way, skaldic verse, though largely accepted as ‘oral’ verse (or at least, with oral origins) is rarely taken off the page and considered purely from the viewpoint of performance. Despite tentative attempts within the scholarly community (see Chapters 2.7,

279 Foley, How to Read an Oral Poem, p. 19.
2.8 and 2.10), scholars are still caught up with unpicking kennings or manuscript variations within the written text, rather than considering how this poetry actually ‘worked’ or sounded.

With the defining features of performance poetry in mind, it is logical that skaldic verse composed orally in the pre-textual era with the intention of being presented as live performance should also be considered from the viewpoint of ‘performance’, or ‘live poetry’. As noted earlier, however, few scholars have attempted such an approach: focus is placed usually on the poem’s intellectual frame-works, its manuscript variations or its thirteenth-century function as a historical footnote or a pedagogic tool.²⁸⁰ To an extent, such treatment is understandable as skaldic verse only survives in written form. Its crucial performance context is essentially lost; yet it does not excuse scholars from failing to treat pre-Christian skaldic poetry as live performance in preference to analysing it solely as page poetry. This therefore begs the questions: how do we analyse an oral poem once it has been written down, and, in a scholarly climate that places emphasis on the written word, how can we bridge the dichotomy between oral performance and page poetry?

2.3. Skaldic Sound: Reading vs. Listening

All poetry contains a degree of musicality: a pounding rhythm, the soft hiss of sibilance or harsh explosive plosives. According to Albert Lord, this is because the majority of modern Western written poetry originates in oral poetry and thus retains an acoustic element: ‘[orality] gave us anaphora [...] alliteration, assonance, rhyme, both internal, medial and final [...] In short, our poetics is derived from the world of orality, with some later additions and modifications introduced by the world of literacy.’²⁸¹ In some cases, this oral or aural element is so much part of a poem that it does not need to be read aloud in order to be ‘heard’. Instead, sound almost booms off the page and echoes in the silent reader’s mind. Reading Rudyard Kipling’s The Way Through the Woods on paper, for example, it is still possible to ‘hear’ the sounds of round-vowel assonance, the steady galloping beat of a horse, and the swishing of skirts:

You will hear the beat of a horse’s feet

²⁸⁰ Discussed above (Chapter 1.5).
²⁸¹ Quoted in Novak, Live Poetry, pp. 27-8.
Skaldic poetry, packed tightly with alliteration and hendingar, provides the reader with a similar acoustic experience of unspoken sound. In the example of stamhendr (‘stammering rhyme’) given by Snorri in Háttatal, it is possible to ‘hear’ the repetition of the penultimate and final word in odd lines, creating a stuttering effect:

\[
\begin{align*}
Lætr &\text{ undin brot brotna} \\
&\text{bragningr fyrir sér hringa.} \\
&Sá tekr fyrir men menia \\
&mætt ord of sik fættir.
\end{align*}
\]

(The chieftain makes twisted ring-fragments fragment before him [i.e. distributes gold]. Because of the necklaces this necklace-diminisheder receives fitting renown about himself.)\(^{283}\)

As noted above, in certain poems such as The Way Through the Woods and the skaldic strophe above, it is possible to argue that there is little dissonance between reading and writing: sound found on the page is merely amplified and made physical when voiced or spoken aloud.

In other poems, however, reading and listening can offer two very different ways of ‘hearing’ or experiencing a poem. If a poem contains no strict metrical structure, for example, then the reader may be misled into thinking that it contains no rhythm at all, when in fact this is not always the case. Julia Novak, for example, demonstrates that although the rap-poem Patriot Act by Rapper D. Kane resembles non-metrical, irregular free verse on the page, in performance the poem’s soundscape is quite different: the performer uses his voice as an instrument to give his words a steady rhythmic beat. Novak considers the line: ‘lemme

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catch a fire,’ and notes that if traditional scansion of the poetic line is employed, then it appears as if this line contains a total of five or six stressed syllables and, as a result, does not fit the rest of the poem’s relatively regular rhythm. In performance, however, Rapper D. Kane not only engages a musical tempo in 4/4 rhythm but delivers this line at double-speed, thereby squeezing the ‘extra’ syllables together and maintaining a regular rhythm of four beats.

Likewise, Kate Tempest plays with pitch and pace to create a similar beat in part of her performance of Brand New Ancients (described at the start of this thesis). In the lines:

the gods are in their gardens
it’s raining, they’re watching plants
man, the gods are the classroom
and those poor things don’t stand a chance.

Tempest almost speaks in double-time as she attempts to squeeze as many syllables as possible into the available time slot, creating a feeling of urgency that intensifies the rhythm. As with Rapper D. Kane, Tempest’s concern is with tempo and timing, not page-bound metrics.

John Miles Foley highlights the danger of syllable counting and thinking textually when analysing oral poetry. Whilst listening to Slavic oral poetry, Foley noticed that in some lines the guslar (poet) would deviate from the normal ten-syllable line by either adding or omitting an extra syllable. Rewinding and listening to the performance again, however, Foley realised that the ‘extra’ syllable was sung before the poem’s starting point whilst the ‘omitted’ syllable was actually a vocal pause, meaning that both the eleven-syllable and nine-syllable ‘variant’ lines nonetheless still consisted of the correct number of acoustic ‘beats.’ Such a revelation led Foley to conclude that in oral poetry, the poetic line is not defined by strict syllable counting (as it often is in American and English written poetry,

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284 Novak, Live Poetry, pp. 87-89.
285 Novak, Live Poetry, pp. 87-89.
286 Transcription my own. To watch the opening clip of Kate Tempest’s Brand New Ancients, see the link given above (Chapter 2.1).
whose origins reside in the metrics of earlier Classical poetry) but instead ‘musically and rhythmically.’

In the examples above it is clear that even though some types of poetry appear to be non-metrical on the page, they nonetheless produce a definite acoustic beat when performed live. In short, rather than producing a traditional metrical rhythm (such as trochaic or iambic pentameter), poetry in performance frequently prioritises timing and tempo over strict syllable counting. The result is something called poetic isochrony: an unwritten tempo that mirrors the ‘irregular rhythms of everyday speech’ in which the performer gives his or her words a distinct rhythmic or musical quality through ‘performed pauses, syncopations, shifts in tempo and pitch.’ By spacing out stressed syllables at regular temporal intervals, the performer nonetheless varies the time it takes to pronounce the un-stressed syllables in between, by drawing out or squeezing syllables into the available time gap. Isochrony is a useful tool for performers as it generates an acoustic beat or audible pulse that is not rule-bound, but can be varied during performance.

Being an unwritten tempo, however, isochronic rhythm is virtually impossible to reflect on the page. In the example of the performed Brand New Ancients, Kate Tempest clearly makes frequent use of isochrony to give her speech a rhythmic quality. In the lines:

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the gods are in the betting shop,
the gods are in the caf,
the gods are smoking fags out the back
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Tempest runs the first two lines together, creating what sounds like a regular metrical rhythm by raising her pitch slightly to give each stressed syllable emphasis. Together, the two lines create a 4/4 beat with four even stresses on the words underlined above. In the third line, however, Tempest jars the rhythm by speaking the first two stressed-syllables gods and smok- quickly, before slowing down the tempo so that she stretches out her delivery of the last two stresses, fags and back. The result is an audible off-beat, a pause that hovers in the air expectantly and creates a kink in the rhythm that grabs the listeners’

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289 Transcription my own.
attention. As with the example of Rapper D. Kane given above, the musicality of Tempest’s delivery of *Brand New Ancients* is clearly central to the aural experience of her poetry: to be heard in its full potential, it must be performed.

One can expect that for an early Scandinavian audience, hearing skaldic poetry spoken aloud would have provided a vastly different experience to that of modern audience who ‘receive’ skaldic sound predominantly through their eyes, as silent symbols on a page. Nevertheless, Snorri Sturluson inadvertently offers a glimpse of ‘skaldic sound’ and use of isochronic rhythm in his suggestion that the skaldic line would have been subject to temporal and rhythmic variation during performance, not unlike the Yugoslav *guslar’s* performance or the isochronic rhythms of Anglo-American slam. In *Háttatal*, Snorri writes:

> Þat er leyfi háttanna at hafa samstofur seinar eða skjótar, sváat dragisk fram eða aprtr ór rétrri tólu setningar, ok megu finnask svá seinar at fimm samstofur sé í Ǫðrú ok inu fjórða vísurði.\(^{290}\)

(It is a licence in verse-forms to have slow or quick syllables so that there is a drawing on or back from the normal number of the rule, and they can be so slow that there are five syllables in the second and fourth line.)\(^{291}\)

Snorri then proceeds to add:

> Nú skal sýna svá skjótar samstofur ok svá settar nær hverja annarri at af því eykr lengð orðsins.\(^{292}\)

(Now we shall demonstrate syllables that are so quick and placed so close to each other that as a result the length of the line is increased.)

Of course, Snorri is still intent on prescribing a strict system of syllable counting to his tally of skaldic metres in order draw parallels between Old Norse poetry and the Classics.

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\(^{290}\) *Háttatal* (ed. Faulkes, p. 7).


\(^{292}\) *Háttatal*, (ed. Faulkes, p. 7).
The exemplary verses that Snorri composes for Háttatal, however, often suggest that line-length and syllable number in performed skaldic poetry did not always conform to the metrical models that he so ardently advocates. Indeed, Snorri demonstrates that regardless of the many non-dróttkvætt metrical variants, such as the eight-syllable hrynhenda that he lists, dróttkvætt used many forms that did not conform to his neat six-syllable model. In the metres alhent, dúnhent and stúfr, for example, not only do alliteration and rhyme placement differ but lines are also shortened and syllables omitted. In such cases, however, Snorri keeps to his strict metrical model by continuously emphasising that any such ‘metrical inconsistencies’ are a fault of past poets and should not be imitated. This is made clear three times:

\[\text{...menn hafa ort fyr rept svá at í einni visu var annar helmingr stýfør en annarr helmingr tvistýfør, ok eru þat háttafoll.}^{293}\]

(... in the past poems have been composed so that in the same stanza one half had one line docked and the other half two lines, and that is metrical inconsistency.)^{294}

Nú skal rita þá háttu er fornskáld hafa kveðit ok eru nú settir saman, þótt þeir hafi ort sumt með háttaföllum, ok eru þessir hættir dróttkvæðir kallaðir í fornum kvæðum.\(^{295}\)

(Now shall be exemplified those variations of form which early poets have used in composition and which are now made into consistent verse-forms, though these poets have in some cases composed with metrical inconsistencies, and these variations in early poems are called dróttkvætt [...]^{296}

[Víða er þat í] fornskálda verka er í einni visu eru ymsir hættir eða háttaföll, ok má eigi yrkja eptir [því] þó at þat þykki eigi spilla i fornkvæðum.\(^{297}\)

\(^{293}\) Háttatal (ed. Faulkes, p. 24).
\(^{295}\) Háttatal (ed. Faulkes, p. 24).
\(^{296}\) Edda: Snorri Sturluson (trans. Faulkes, p. 198).
\(^{297}\) Háttatal (ed. Faulkes, p. 26).
(It often happens in the work of early poets that there are several variations or metrical inconsistencies in a single stanza, and this ought not to be imitated though it is not considered a fault in the early poems.)

Apart from the tantalising allusion to earlier skaldic conceptions (or lack thereof) having been different, Snorri seems unwilling to concede that rigid metrics may not have been the chief concern for earlier skálds composing and performing in an oral environment. As noted above, although it is unlikely that skaldic poets delivered their lines in the same off-beat jarring rhythms as rappers and south London performance artists, Snorri’s examples of ‘metrically inconsistent’ verse nonetheless suggest that skaldic poetry could also make use of a variety of slow or quick syllables in order to create an audible pulse and varied rhythm.

While Snorri’s comments (above) suggest he was beginning to think more like a scholarly writer than a skaldic performer, they also suggest that a move from oral poetry (less dominated by rigid written metres) to written poetry was beginning to take place in Iceland during the thirteenth-century. As has often been noted in this thesis, reading and listening to a poem involve two very different experiences of receiving a poem, and it is only in the orally delivered poem (whether experienced in a formal poetry reading or coffee-shop slam) that the full force of sound can be appreciated. These features are not limited to isochronics and rhythm: a poem in performance has the potential to offer other sounds that a written poem is rarely able to include (unless written in an ethnopoietic style), such as a gasp, a cry, the lowering of the voice, the changing of the tempo, a high-pitched squeal, a relentless monotone, an angry tone or ear-splitting volume. All of these and more form part of the performers’ extra-lexical acoustic vocabulary. Such physically articulated sound surrounds a listener, playing on his or her feelings, memories, and associations, working along with the visual experience, enveloping them in the performance in a way that the activity of silent reading cannot attempt to equal. Sound is an aural, acoustic experience that fills the ears and floods the senses, just as

silence

or a pause;

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298 Edda: Snorri Sturluson (trans. Faulkes, p. 200)
Similarly, the lack of sound — a pause or silence — can often say just as much as words, and works just as effectively by means of jarring the flow of the rhythmic beat, to catch the audience unaware and draw their attention. Indeed, live, orally-performed sound can create a very tangible experience which is left unrecorded in the extant silent records of skaldic page-poetry. This therefore begs the questions: should such acoustic elements be considered as an essential part of skaldic poetry and, if so, how they can be restored?

2.4. The Meaning of Sound, the Sound of Meaning

As noted in the previous section, musicality and acoustic sound are two important features that distinguish performance poetry from written poetry. It should be remembered, however, that they are not simply a kind of aesthetic flourish or pleasurable acoustic experience. Indeed, as suggested above, a performer’s use of pitch, pace, volume and tone will often create an aural soundscape that the artist feels is integral to a poem’s meaning and, as a result, they will also play a key role in facilitating audience interpretation. Charles Bernstein in particular emphasises the intrinsic relationship between sound and meaning, arguing that while sound may be extra-lexical, it is by no means extra-semantic: instead, to his mind ‘a poem’s sound and meaning are aspects of one another.’

Bernstein argues, for example, that in the ‘audiotext’ of a poem (a term he uses to describe the vocalisation of a written text), the performer will commonly employ not only verbal but non-verbal forms of expression to communicate poetic meaning. These non-verbal elements, referred to as ‘sound patterns’ or a ‘para-language’ by Bernstein and Novak respectively, consist of sounds that encompass the whole range of the human voice. As noted above, these non-verbal sound patterns are rarely produced for sound’s sake, but are meant to offer crucial sound

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299 Bernstein, ‘Introduction’, p. 17. It is important to point out that although Bernstein’s focus is solely on the modern poetry reading — or the ‘oral sounding’ of a written text — his ideas inadvertently extend to cover poetry composed and performed orally in front of a live audience.

bites that can communicate an idea, an expression, a feeling, or simply offer a modification to the verbal text.301

A good example that demonstrates the ability of sound patterns (like those noted above) which are meant to enhance and clarify the meaning of a written poem is found in Peter Middleton’s analysis of Jackie Kay’s performance of her poem *Brendan Gallacher*.302 Middleton notes that the written version of Kay’s poem includes regular line-length and metrical rhythm, except for a noticeably shorter last line.303 When listening to Kay read *Brendan Gallacher* aloud, however, Middleton notes several key features that are obvious in the written text of the poem. Kay’s strong Scottish accent, for example, explains apparently unusual rhymes of diphthongised vowels such as ‘poor’ and ‘door’ with -er ending words. Furthermore, it is clear that her pauses do not correspond with the line-breaks on the page. More importantly for the present discussion of sound, Middleton notes that Kay often uses non-verbal sounds to modify or enhance textual meaning. In performance, for example, he notes how Kay colours the phrase ‘some place far’ with total disdain and speaks the final line slowly for dramatic effect, a feature that had never occurred to Middleton during his silent reading of Kay’s poem. These features cause Middleton to argue that ‘page layout is not a good guide to the oral sounding of a poem’ and that, to fully understand a poem, silent reading alone will not suffice: to Middleton’s mind, most poetry needs to be both read silently and heard aloud if one wants to its full meaning.304

Another example that highlights the power of sound to not only enhance, but also radically change a poem’s meaning is provided by Bernstein in his analysis of Baraka’s *Afro-American Lyric*.305 Considering the written version of *Afro-American Lyric*, Bernstein felt that the poem should be interpreted in the light of Marxist political pamphlets. On hearing Baraka reading the poem aloud, however, Bernstein changed his mind, arguing that the poet ‘turns the poem’s diatribe into the cross between a sound poem and a scat jazz improvisation.’306 Once again, Bernstein argues that the voicing or audiotext of Barak’s poetry is ‘no mere embellishment’ or secondary ornamental addition to the written text, but rather an entire restaging of the poem’s meaning. More importantly, Bernstein uses

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302 Middleton, ‘How to Read a Reading of a Written Poem’, pp. 7 - 34.
303 Middleton, ‘How to Read a Reading of a Written Poem’, p. 12.
304 Middleton, ‘How to Read a Reading of a Written Poem’, p.13.
Afro-American Lyric to demonstrate that while sound is not intrinsic to the meaning of a word, when it is used in a particular way in a performance (for example, the use of an angry tone or hushed whisper) then it performs meaning. Essentially, new meaning is found in the performance of sound rather than merely in the sound itself. In short, sound can not only be integral to a poem’s meaning, it can also drastically alter an audience’s understanding, interpretation and experience of a poem.

As noted above, in performance the sounds of spoken poetry can transform audience understanding and generate meaning which extends beyond the written word, as non-verbal sounds are used to perform meanings that reach beyond the words themselves. Indeed, in some cases, meaning and sound come into conflict, as occurs when a poem’s musicality (its physical ‘sound’) and its literal meaning (expressed in language) do not necessarily work together. Gerald Manley Hopkins’s poetry provides a good example of when a poem’s sound does not necessarily have any bearing on its meaning, and vice versa. Hopkins always insisted, for example, that his work was essentially oral and stated that ‘my verse is less to be read than heard, [...] it is oratorical, that is the rhythm is so.’ Essentially, it seems that Hopkins claimed that the printed texts of his work should be viewed as a musical score. As the critic Balz Engler points out, however, the literary complexity of Hopkins’ work means that although the music of his poetry’s speech-sounds depend on hearing it read aloud, it is almost impossible to understand the literal meaning of the text by listening alone: to be fully understood, the poem needs to be read on paper as well. In short, although sound can be intrinsic to a poem’s meaning, Hopkins’ poetry nonetheless demonstrates that in some cases, reading and listening provide two separate and very different experiences of a poem.

Another example in which the ‘sound’ of a poem is separate or detachable from its meaning can be found in Gísla saga Súrssonar. In a famous episode of the saga, Gísli’s sister Þórdís overhears Gísli utter a fatal verse. Interestingly enough, it is only later that she understands what Gísli has actually said. As the saga states: Þórdís nam þegar vísuna, gengr heim ok hefir ráðit vísuna (Þordís remembered the verse, went home and interpreted what

The example suggests that, like in the example of Hopkins’ poetry above, in the Old Norse world the literal meaning of a poem’s ‘verbal text’ when spoken aloud was not always obvious, even for contemporary skaldic audiences. This means that Gísli’s verse was first ‘heard’ by Þórdís and appreciated only on the level of ‘sound’ (that is, she did not ‘understand’ it straight away). It is only later that Þórdís processed the literal meaning of Gísli’s verse, which suggests that there is reason to consider skaldic poetry from two levels: as musical abstract sound, and in terms of literal meaning.

In the examples given above, acoustic sound is envisioned as something solid and detachable from the written text: it is a physical, musical object that is separate from (if intertwined with) the textual meaning of a poem. It is the materialising aspect of sound in spoken poetry that highlights the power of sound not just to merely enhance or modify the meaning of a written poem, but to provide an important bridge between the two modes of acoustic reception: hearing and listening. Unlike the examples of Kay and Baraka’s poetry, where the focus of analysis is on the dissonance between reading and listening, Hopkins’ poetry demonstrates a further tension between the simultaneous experience of listening and hearing, which Bernstein labels as the ‘poetic mode’. In the poetic mode, Bernstein explains that oral or physically articulated poetry combines material sound (such as a dog barking, or a hammer hitting a nail) with human speech. When poetry is spoken aloud, the audience will thus experience poetry as immediate, nonsensical auditory sound-shapes and process it physiologically as ‘hearing’ (just as they would perceive a foreign language or music), whilst at the same time the desire to understand the poem’s literal meaning will cause them to process sound psychologically by ‘listening’ to the words themselves. Hopkins’ poetry, although notoriously complex and more literary than oral in character, nonetheless combines musical aspects with verbal meaning so that, as Bernstein argues is typical of the poetic mode, it brings language back from the symbolic sphere of writing and into the physical reality of sound, taking poetry off the page and giving it a concrete reality.

Material sound and human speech thus combine in spoken poetry in such a way that meaning is no longer found simply in the ‘verbal text’ or the way that words are articulated,

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310 It is also interesting to note that nema (written here in the past tense form nam) also means to take or to seize, with the connotations of an object implied. Gísla Saga Súrssonar (ed. Björn K. Þóroðsson and Guðni Jónsson. p. 59). Modern English Translation taken from: Gísli Súrsson’s Saga (trans. M. S. Regal, p. 21).
but in the double-experience of both listening to poetry and hearing poetry as concrete sound. In fact, there are some circumstances where sound becomes so detached from the written text that reading virtually serves no purpose in the process of interpretation whatsoever; instead, it is therefore the responsibility of oral sound to communicate and carry the full weight of meaning, rendering the written text wholly redundant. In the case of the nonsense poem *The Loch Ness Monster Song* by Edwin Morgan, for example, sound is so important that the poem does not make sense without it. In fact, in its written form *The Loch Ness Monster’s Song* looks like utter gibberish:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Sssnnwhufffl}\text{ll} & \text{?} \\
\text{Hnwhufffl hhnnwfl hnf} & \text{l hnf} \text{l} \\
\text{Gdroiblobhlhobngbl gbl g g g g glbgl}. & \\
\text{Drulhafablhafubhhafahfahl fl fl -} \\
\text{Gm grawwwww grf grawf awfgm graw gm}. & \\
\text{..........} & \\
\text{Sgra ka gka fok!} & \\
\text{Grof frawff gahf?} & \\
\text{Gombl mbl bl -} & \\
\text{bIm plm,} & \\
\text{bIm plm,} & \\
\text{bIm plm,} & \\
\text{blp}. & \text{313}
\end{align*}
\]

When Morgan speaks his poem in front of a live audience, however, literal or ‘textual’ meaning is replaced by ‘implied’ meaning, which is inferred from the audience by the expressive sound-shapes and shifting vocal patterns that Morgan employs. Using a range of non-verbal expressions, Morgan brings the Loch Ness Monster to life and gives it a colourful personality. By raising his voice slightly with an air of irritation when sounding the line: ‘Grof frawff gahf?’, Morgan also allows the monster to ask questions (‘Sssnnwhufffl?’) and express mild outrage (‘Sgra ka gka fok!’). Morgan thus evokes a lively, highly-coloured monologue spoken by the haughty Loch Ness Monster as it raises its head and makes a few

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huffy remarks before sinking back down below the depths. Of course, there is very little literal meaning contained within the aptly termed ‘nonsense’ poem. Instead, Morgan’s soundscape tells a story, but an abstract story whose narrative details are ultimately up to audience and their own creative imagination; presumably, the Loch Ness Monster’s ‘song’ will be slightly different for each listener. Furthermore, the nonsensical nature of Morgan’s poem means that his audience receives sound primarily through hearing and not listening: like hearing a foreign language, meaning is gleaned by interpreting how something sounds, and not what is said.

Another example that demonstrates just how important live, physically articulated sound is to poetic meaning is Benjamin Bagby’s musical performance of the Anglo-Saxon poem Beowulf. In Bagby’s performance, however, sound not only detaches from literal word-for-word meaning but becomes a liminal experience for the listening audience. Like Edwin Morgan, Bagby cannot rely on his audience understanding what he is saying, so he is forced to use sound creatively as his primary source of expression. In scenes involving the monster Grendel, for example, Bagby lowers his voice and increases the tempo of both voice and instrument to mirror Grendel’s impending approach and generate suspense. In contrast, scenes depicting the mead hall involve a more boisterous tone and higher, lighter almost laughing pitch. By contrasting different vocal sounds and musical patterns with one another, Bagby ensures that the audience connects (perhaps unconsciously) certain characters or motifs with specific vocal and musical arrangements.

The sound of the Old English poem Beowulf spoken to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument does more than facilitate audience understanding of the developing narrative: it actually transports the listeners to the entertainment of the mead-hall and

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314 It would be interesting to compare different recordings of Edwin Morgan performing The Loch Ness Monster Song and explore how much (or how little) he varied his vocal delivery each time that he performed. The written text in the form above is found printed as the ‘standard’ version, which thus raises further questions with regard to the primacy or dominance of the written text versus the oral delivery: should this poem be regarded as a spoken poem that has been written down, or a written poem that has been spoken? For further debate on the relationship between reading and listening, writing and speaking, see: Bernstein, ‘Introduction’, pp. 4-22; Middleton, ‘How to Read a Reading of a Written Poem’, pp. 7-25; Engler, ‘An Experiment in Reading: Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess”, and ‘Exploding Meanings’, and ‘Reading and Listening: Conclusion’, pp. 67-110.

315 Bagby, Beowulf (DVD, 2006).
transforms Bagby into an Anglo-Saxon scop. As oral poetry, Anglo-Saxon poetry is full of alliteration with an audible metrical beat so it is almost certain that sound and rhythm would have been central in a poem’s composition and performance: like skaldic poetry, then, Anglo-Saxon verse was composed not only with the intention of oral delivery but with the intention of an audience’s aural experience. Bagby argues when read aloud from a book (like Bernstein’s poetry reading), without musical accompaniment, ornamental vocal flourishes or tone change, the poem is not the same: it reduces the performance, and audience experience, completely. Of course, Bagby makes no attempt to ‘reconstruct’ an ‘original’ Old English performance but instead, as Thomas Cable notes: ‘the text as we have it was not meant to be performed, but Ben [Bagby] returns the audience to an earlier stage of a more dramatic, more expressive form.’

Even if the modern twenty-first century audience does not understand exactly what Bagby is saying, just the sound and acoustic presence of the medieval Germanic language is enough to invoke a liminal ‘make belief’ performance space where audience understanding is not based on the verbalisation or sounding of a text, but the context of sound and sound performance. ‘Hearing’ the ‘sound’ of Anglo-Saxon poetry not as individual lexemes but as concrete, musical sound is thus more immediate and more engaging than ‘listening’ to and decoding the poem’s meaning, and allows the audience to step into what Bernstein calls the ‘concave acoustic space’ of the poem. Essentially, sound in poetry is about more than just the voicing of a ‘verbal text’: in Bagby’s performance, words lose all meaning and the experience of a poem – its sound, its acoustic space – is what gives it meaning. Such observations about Anglo-Saxon verse and nonsense poetry as concrete, musical sound are important for the analysis of a closely related type of oral, alliterative, stress-timed Germanic verse: skaldic poetry.

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316 The idea of performance being ‘transformative’ or evoking different times, spaces and character roles is at the heart of Performance Studies Theory, and this central aspect that is something that I shall cover in more detail in Chapter 3.
317 A great deal of Old English poetry is thought to have been composed around the time when many poems were being written down, or at least influenced by literature. The Old English alliterative poem Beowulf, for example, is thought to be a scholarly fusing of different stories and it is uncertain whether the poem, in the form that we have it today, was remembered from earlier times, or whether it was composed later in the ninth- or tenth-century. For further discussion, see: Opland, Anglo-Saxon Oral Poetry.
318 Benjamin Bagby, speaking in a round table discussion that was recorded as part of his Beowulf.
319 Thomas Cable, in a round table discussion filmed especially for the DVD release of Benjamin Bagby’s Beowulf.
2.5. Skaldic Poetry as Page Poetry

The above examples demonstrate that live, physically articulated sound plays a major role in conveying meaning and facilitating audience understanding of poetry. Whether ‘listening’ to a poem being read aloud as speech or ‘hearing’ poetry performance as a piece of music, sound has the power to modify, enhance or contradict a written poem’s meaning, and locate audience understanding in the acoustic experience of a poem. By oscillating between ‘hearing’ a poem as material sound and ‘listening’ to it as literal human speech, the ‘poetic mode’ (as Charles Bernstein terms it) becomes an important way of not only receiving poetry, but understanding it. For many skaldic audiences, this mode of aural reception would have been the only one available during the pre-Christian era. This suggests that skaldic poetry was cognitively processed and understood in a manner drastically removed from modern scholarly practice – silent reading – something that suggests more scholars should approach skaldic verse from an acoustic angle instead. Indeed, it is possible to argue that the sound of skaldic poetry held just as much power and value for a pre-Christian skaldic audience as the literal meaning of the verbal text.

Certainly, if we consider the extant prose describing skaldic verse and performance in the various saga accounts, it appears that sound could play an important political role in the performance of skaldic poetry. In the short þáttr known as Sneglu-Halla þáttr for example, the Norwegian court poet Halli recites a poem at the non-Norse speaking English court of Harald Godwinsson. Unable to understand the literal meaning of the poem, uttered as it is in a foreign language, the King turns to his own court poet for his advice:

Sezk Halli fyrr konungi ok flutti fram kvæðit; ok er lokit var kvæðinu, spurði konungr skáld sitt, er var með honum, hvern veg vægi kvæði.321

(Halli sat down at the king’s knee and delivered his poem. When the poem was finished, the king asked his poet, who was with him, how the poem was).322

Halli, however, appears to have uttered complete ‘rubbish’ to the King, as the saga author recounts:

En kvæði þetta var endílausa ein, ok kvað hann þat fram af munni sér.323

[Halli] had not composed a poem about the king but had just recited rubbish, and on that account he could not teach it.324

In a lausavísa, Halli later admits to the Norwegian king that he composed a drápa riddled with metrical mistakes (see Chapter 3.3), suggesting that whilst he may have spoken actual poetry, it was nonetheless artistically poor. Either way, King Harald and his court seem none the wiser to Halli’s poetic dupe, suggesting that it was just the sound of skaldic verse being uttered, and the prestige attached to this social sound ‘event’, that was of importance and value during this particular episode.

If sound could play an important political role in skaldic performance, then it could also play an important religious or ritualistic role. Even if a skáld performed a poem that was not metrically regular (see analysis of isochrony above), his syllabic and alliterative stress would nevertheless undoubtedly create an audible rhythm or acoustic beat during live performance. Such rhythmic beat could potentially could invoke a ritualistic-like atmosphere. Rhythm, of course, is an important feature in many ceremonies, be it secular or sacred: shamans, for example, are known for their decorative drums that are banged repeatedly during a ritual to help induce trance and summon spirits.325 In Nigeria today, the court poet bangs a drum to announce the arrival of the king before he launches into his oral praise poetry.326 I have personally experienced a form of semi-religious ‘ritual’ poetry performance as part of a performance by the Alaskan-Greenlandic group Pamuya at Reykjavík’s new opera house, Harpa.327 Here the group performed a series of traditional Inuit hymns and poems directed towards various seal-gods and harvest-goddesses, all the while banging drums and chanting: while I could not understand what the performers were saying, the acoustic experience nonetheless signalled that a new context or frame of ritual performance had been engaged, a sombre atmosphere full of semi-sacred significance. One

327 Pamuya in Concert at Harpa, Reykjavík (February 2013).
wonders whether the rhythm of skaldic poetry might have a similar effect upon its audience during live performance.

Sound thus has the power to summon and invoke, to call an unseen presence into the performance space. In Nigeria, for example, sound often functions as a key metacommunicative signal: ‘as soon as [the drums] are beaten, listeners immediately recognise the ‘presence’ of the king even without seeing him, because the sign (drum) and the referent (monarch) are associated.’ In a sense, the same can be said about skaldic poetry. For example, it might be said that poems composed for a dead king or circulated around the country about a living patron could, even when the person was absent, arguably invoke his presence. In *Eiriksmál*, for example, the poet describes how the dead King Eiríkr blóðǫx enters Valþöll and meets Óðinn. As Terry Gunnell has recently argued, the poet’s performance transforms the audience into einherjar and temporarily connects them with the world of the dead, making it unclear whether the dead Eiríkr has been called into the audience’s space, or the audience has entered the world of the dead.

Sound can thus set up a liminal performance space with political and/or religious implications for the listening audience. Just as banging a drum in shamanic ritual invokes spirits, the pounding rhythm of pre-Christian skaldic verse can in some circumstances create an incantatory beat, enhanced by the articulation of mythological names and the sound of heightened, Odinnic speech (see Chapter 2.7). In a recent experimental performance, the poet Elías Knorr took a non-religious verse from *Eiríks saga rauða* and performed it to a traditional Galecian chant. Apart from creating an interesting fusion of styles, Elías’ performance in the ‘hearing’ mode (i.e. not listening and decoding words) sounded ritualistic, like a chant or invocation. Similarly, the German folk-group *Faun* have recorded the verse that Egill speaks when inscribing healing runes into a whale-bone in *Egils saga* as part of a song. Using haunting woodwind sounds, a steady drum beat and balanced harmonies, even if the modern listener does not understand the words being sung, the song brings the verses to life in such a way that it *sounds* like an actual curse or charm is being uttered. Of course, it is highly unlikely that skaldic verse sounded anything like Galecian

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330 Elías Knorr performed his poem at the event *Ljóð í leiðinni: Upplestrarkvöld Meðgöngaljóða og Reykjavík Bókmenntaborg* at Stúdentakjallarinn, Háskóli Íslands in Reykjavík, Iceland (October 30, 2013).
chants or electronic German ‘goth music’, but these examples nonetheless demonstrate one overwhelmingly clear point: that the sound of skaldic poetry would have been fundamental to its audience’s understanding and experience.

In short, by subjecting skaldic verse to the pen and relegating it to the page, skaldic poetry loses one of its most important, crucially defining features: sound. Writing a skaldic poem down and reading it silently in one’s head means that the musicality and concrete material sound of a poem is completely lost. All that remains of the poem is a skeletal structure of words and punctuation. As the above analysis demonstrates, sound is intrinsic to a poem’s meaning – not only its literal meaning, but its experiential, conceptual and abstract meaning too. To strip skaldic poetry of its acoustic richness is thus to limit scholarly understanding of skaldic performance (and the socio-political, religious and mythological contexts contained within it) to a textual, post-medieval mentality which is only perpetuated by the scholarly insistence to reproduce skaldic verse in nothing but textual, printed editions.

Indeed, the very idea of writing skaldic poetry in lines going down the page would have been wholly alien for skálds composing in a pre-literate era without access to pen and paper. In fact, it seems highly unlikely that skálds composing in what Walter Ong calls a ‘primary oral culture’ were thinking in terms of the poetic ‘line’ or ‘line length’ in the same sense as written poetry at all.332 In Foley’s analysis of primary oral cultures which focus on the Yugoslav guslar, for example, Foley demonstrates that in oral performance the term ‘line’ and ‘word’ (reč) possess radically different meanings to ‘line’ and ‘word’ in the written sense. Whereas Pije vino (‘drinking wine’) are two words in ordinary speech, in the poetic mode it functions as only one word, a single reč, showing that scholars cannot force a book-bound understanding onto oral poetry (where a ‘word’ can be a whole phrase).333 As such, the analysis of pre-Christian skaldic verse composed before the onset of writing and

332 To be clear, I am not applying Ong’s idea of ‘Primary Oral Cultures’ to skaldic society on a wholesale basis, as it is possible that some skálds and audience members were aware of runes and runic writing systems, even if they did not necessarily know how to write themselves. The Karlevi rune-stone, for example, contains a skaldic verse written in runes, and there are some saga descriptions of characters such as Grettir and Egill carving poetry in runes (see Chapter 3.4). In addition, Scandinavians raiding and trading abroad may have been brought into contact with writing through ‘literate’ (or ‘book’) cultures such as Rome or Anglo-Saxon England. In terms of skaldic society, however, I am suggesting that in a culture whose primary mode of transmission (not only poetry, but laws, genealogies and other important information) was oral, an oral mind-set (as opposed to one thinking in books and letters) would thus prevail. See: Ong, Orality and Literacy.

lineated-pages involves a huge cognitive shift on the part of the scholar, who needs to consider it from a quite different viewpoint to the printed page.

Re-oralising the written word as acoustic sound is thus essential if Old Norse scholarship wishes to move forward and make increased progress in the study of skaldic poetry, as it was originally received. For pre-Christian skaldic audiences, live sound was the only form in which skaldic poetry existed so there was no opportunity to re-read a poem or enjoy the simultaneous experience of reading and listening that Middleton argues is so integral to understanding modern poetry. In this respect, modern audiences are ironically more fortunate than both earlier skálds and scholars. As skaldic verse only exists in the textual environment of medieval manuscripts and later copies, scholars are afforded the privileged position of being able to read, re-read and spend time decoding the literal and symbolic meanings behind skaldic poetry. In doing so, scholars can use these poems to provide important cultural, mythological and even socio-political insights not only into pre-Christian Scandinavia, but the thirteenth-century Icelandic context in which these poems were organised and set down on paper. Although reading has thus become the necessary mode of processing skaldic poetry in the post-medieval world, as both Middleton and the oral nature of skaldic verse demonstrate, reading should neither side-line nor undervalue the importance of skaldic sound. Instead, scholars should promote both reading and listening to skaldic verse as essential – and more importantly, equal – approaches to analysing and understanding skaldic verse. As Middleton’s experience of Jackie Kay’s Brendan Gallacher demonstrates, reading and listening should not be considered as two separate or mutually exclusive approaches to interpreting poetry, but as simultaneous exercises necessary for unlocking a poem’s full meaning.

2.6. Skaldic Sound: Re-Oralising the Written Word

One way of getting around the problem of skaldic poetry as page-poetry might be to produce editions that use the concept of ‘visual’ sound poetry, an idea that Marjorie Perloff has explored in her article ‘After Free Verse: The New Nonlinear Poetics.’ In the absence of a live performer, Perloff explores the idea of non-linear poetics — a type of modern poetry that is concerned with ‘the theatre of the page’ — where the page becomes a space

for visual performance.\textsuperscript{335} Perloff uses Maggie O’Sullivan’s \textit{A Lesson from the Cockerel}, as an example of such page theatre:

\begin{verbatim}
POPPY THANE. PENDLE DUST. BOLDO SACHET GAUDLES
GIVE GINVER. GIVE INK. SMUDGE JEEDELA LEAVINGS,
TWITCH JULCE. WORSEN. WRIST DRIP. SKINDA. JANDLE.
UDDER DIADEMS INTERLUCE.
ICYCLE OPALINE RONDA.
CRIMINAL
CRAB RATTLES ON THE LUTE
\end{verbatim}

O’Sullivan’s experimental, carefully positioned typographical layout makes clear that her poem was composed specifically to be read on the page.\textsuperscript{336} Unlike experimental ‘page-theatre’ poetry, however, skaldic verse was never designed to be printed in books. As a result, meaning and ‘performance’ are rarely encoded in the manuscript’s page typography. In fact, in medieval Icelandic manuscripts skaldic poetry is not divided nor is it made visually separate from the prose: as a result, there is nothing in the page’s visual layout that signals: ‘this is poetry.’ As the visual layout of the medieval manuscripts do little to signal how the skaldic poem should have sounded, modern editors similarly do not attempt to represent skaldic sound in their written editions. Instead, skaldic poetry is presented purely as page-poetry, a written poem in stanzaic form descending neatly down the centre of blank white page, as if it were akin to the likes of poets such as William Wordsworth, Maggie O’Sullivan or Simon Armitage. Oral theorists and modern poetry critics argue that when editors write down the ‘verbal text’ of an oral performance poem, they should attempt to transcribe the \textit{sound} of live poetry visually on the page. Julia Novak, for example, offers a system that attempts to reproduce the performer’s extra-lexical vocal qualities on the page by means of the poem’s visual arrangement.\textsuperscript{337} Novak argues that you can:

\begin{itemize}
  \item represent rising and falling pitch by raising and lowering letters;
  \item tempo can be shown by increasing or decreasing space between letters; \textbf{VOLUME} can be bold for loudness, and (…) can show a brief pause or silence. As stress was such an important feature of skaldic verse, perhaps \textbf{bold} or \textit{underlining} accented syllables could
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{335} Perloff, ‘After Free Verse’, p. 89.
\textsuperscript{336} Perloff, ‘After Free Verse’, pp. 89-93.
\textsuperscript{337} See, for example: Novak, \textit{Live Poetry}, pp. 127-130.
indicate where to place skaldic stress, whilst SMALL CAPS could represent a harsh or abrupt, end-stopped pronunciation, whereas italics could signal softness or ‘flow.’ Although it is of course impossible to know exactly how different skálds sounded during their various different performances, it would nonetheless be an interesting exercise to attempt to represent sound visually through formatting techniques, rather than assuming that sound is inherently encoded in the words themselves. For example, the first verse of *Gylfaginning* supposedly spoken by the famous ninth-century Norwegian Bragi Boddason, is usually printed in the following format:

*Gefjun dró frá Gylfa*

*glóð djúþróðul ððla,*

*svá at af renrirrauknum*

*rauk, Danmarkar auka.*

*Báru ðxn ok áttta*

*ennitunl þar er gengu*

*fyrir vineyar viðrri*

*valrauf, fjógru haufuð.*

(‘Gefjun drew from Gylfi, glad, a deep-ring of land [>the island of Zealand] so that from the swift-pullers [oxen] steam rose: Denmark’s extension. The oxen wore eight brow-stars [>eyes] as they went hauling their plunder, the wide island of meadows, and four heads.’)

Following the a modern, experimental layout that seeks to represent sound visually on the paper, as used by Sullivan and Novak, the skaldic strophe (above) could, for example, be represented as follows:

*Gefjun dró frá Gylfa*

(.....)

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I asked an Icelandic friend of mine, Kamilla Baldursdóttir, to speak the strophe aloud several times for me. Although each time she spoke the verse there were subtle acoustic variations, there was definitely a breathy, falling quality with soft pauses and distinct stresses (interestingly, not always on the first syllable). Of course, we have absolutely no way of knowing the subtle vocal variations that different skálds used during their numerous live performances, so any attempt to replicate sound becomes entirely guesswork. What the above layout does, however, is stop the silent reader from seeing skaldic verse as simply Times New Roman words on the page: it is seen as sound and so in a sense, the reader’s eyes become their ears. In fact, attempting to capture a poem’s sound by experimenting with visual layout is arguably just as valid as forcing skaldic verse into neat, evenly spaced lines in the middle of a white A5 page, in addition to adding footnotes and emending orthography. Nevertheless, the page as a stage is still a poor substitution for live oral performance, as skaldic performance is ultimately reduced to symbols and lines without tone or timbre, let alone physical body movement, gesture and expression.

Whilst it is impossible to recapture the ‘sound’ of earlier skaldic performance – the performer’s individual tone, timbre, non-verbal acoustics and dialectal variation, which would undoubtedly vary from performance to performance – recording a skaldic poem digitally as an audiotape would be nonetheless be hugely beneficial to the scholarly community. Arguably, an attempt at recording skaldic sound would be just as valid, and just as speculative, as presenting skaldic performance as a printed text, standardised according to ‘Classical Old Icelandic’ orthography in neat, regimented lines littered with punctuation.

341 An interesting project for future scholars could be conducting fieldwork in which a selection of Icelanders are asked to read certain stanzas aloud. These ‘performances’ could be recorded (both audio and visual) and the ‘sound’ of the stanza ‘transcribed’ using the techniques suggested by Novak.
marks. The online database for *The Skaldic Editing Project*, for example, uploads skaldic verses with hyperlinks that allow the interactive user to navigate through different levels of information, such as manuscript context or kenning referents. Adding a sound recording would neither trump nor take priority over the written word, but simply add another (and, arguably, very important) level of information to these verses. Similarly, when new editions of prosimetric sagas or even the poems themselves (such as Richard North’s *Haustlöng*) are produced, a CD or online edition containing oral recordings of the verses could accompany the text, so that scholars and students can experience both reading and listening to skaldic poetry simultaneously. Rather than analysing the performer’s tone or timbre, like Julia Novak proposes for analysing live Slam poetry, the listener may simply experience skaldic poetry through ‘hearing’, and process the verse as material sound rather than just written symbols. To re-oralise the written word, no matter how impossible it is to recreate earlier performances, would thus not only take us closer to skaldic ‘sound’, but to the skaldic audience’s mentality and audience understanding not just of poetic meaning, but the important social, political and mythological contexts surrounding it.

The above discussion should demonstrate that it is no longer sufficient to simply ‘read’ skaldic poetry on the page as part of a modern literary book culture. Live, acoustic sound is just as important to understanding the original audience’s experience of a poem as silent reading and, therefore, by *only* writing skaldic verse according to current book-bound convention, I believe that modern editors severely limit their audience’s understanding of skaldic verse. Just as it is important to respect the Slavic *reč* (word) as meaning something completely different in oral poetry, so too is it important not to force a literary, book-bound model onto skaldic poetry. After all, as argued above, *skálds* had virtually no experience of pen and ink, they similarly had no concept of black-and-white letters on manuscript pages. Indeed, if skaldic poets did not envision their poetry as written lines going *down* the *page*, then they must have been composing with a very different conception of poetry altogether. Of course, this poses some very important questions for scholars wishing to make a cognitive ‘switch’ in order access the skaldic poetic mind-set. If skaldic poetry was never meant for the page, we must therefore ask the question: just how did *skálds* and their audience think about poetry according to their largely oral mind-set?
2.7. Native Conceptions of Skaldic Verse

Skaldic poetry is perhaps most famously known in its guise as a slippery object: in Old Norse mythology, poetry takes the form of various bodily fluids and intoxicating substances, ranging from the Æsir’s sacred spittle, along with the blood of brain-box Kvasir, eagle vomit (or excrement, for the unlucky skáld) and the famous mead of the jötunn Suttungr, stolen by Óðinn that, with one sip, brews honey-tongued poets. This mythological connection between liquid and poetry is also a common motif in skaldic poetry. The skálds themselves often describe their poetry as a liquid residing within them, bursting to break free. As the poet Vólu-Steinn says:

*Heyr Mims vinar mina*
- mér er fundr gefinn þundar -
*við góma sker glymja*
*glaumbergs, Egill, strauma.*

(Hear, Egill, my streams [> the mead] of Mim’s friend’s [> Óðinn’s] joy-hill [> breast] echo against my gum-skerries [> teeth]. Thund’s [> Óðinn’s] find bursts forth and is granted to me.)

Einarr skálaglamm also says:

*Eisar vógr fyrir visa,*
*verk Rǫgnis mér hagna,*
*pýtr Óðreris alda*
*aldr hafs við fles galdra.*

(Wave of time’s sea rushes before the prince. Rognir’s [> Óðinn’s] deeds [> poetry] benefit me. Swell of Odrerir pounds against song’s skerry [> my teeth].)

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342 This narrative is told at length in Skáldskaparmál (ed. Faulkes, pp. 3-5). For the English translation, see: Edda: Snorri Sturluson (trans. Faulkes, pp. 61-4).
343 Skáldskaparmál (ed. Faulkes, p. 13, verse 37).
344 Edda: Snorri Sturluson (trans. Faulkes, p. 71). For further analysis of skaldic ‘calls to attention’, see Chapters 2.7. and 3.7.
345 Skáldskaparmál (ed. Faulkes, p. 13, verse 34).
Similar perceptions of poetry are found in other oral (and literary) poetic traditions. Ruth Finnegan, for example, notes that Alaskan Eskimos reportedly wait in silence for the poetic inspiration to ‘flow’, as Finnegan describes how ‘they [poems, inspiration] take shape in the minds of men and rise up like bubbles from the depths of the sea, bubbles that seek the air to burst in the light.’\(^{347}\)

Like Óðinn’s mead rising up inside the skáld, the Eskimos that Finnegan studied similarly conceived of poetry as liquid rising up and bursting forth. In Indian tradition, Soma is also frequently perceived as the ‘mead of poetry’, also a drink for poets, kings and Brahmins, which provides an interesting direct parallel to Óðinn’s precious mjǫðr in the Norse tradition.\(^{348}\) Even in twenty-first century poetic culture, poetry is often considered as something flowing from ‘within’. The popular British spoken-word poet Benjamin Zephaniah, for example, has a whole poem dedicated to the composition of poetry, which he calls Dis Poetry. Some of the ‘lyrics’ to his poem are as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{.....Dis poetry is like a riddim dat drops} \\
\text{De tongues fires a riddim dat shoots like shots} \\
\text{[.....]} \\
\text{Dis poetry is wid me, below me and above,} \\
\text{Dis poetry’s from inside me} \\
\text{It goes to you} \\
\text{WID LUV.} \quad \text{\(^{349}\)}
\end{align*}
\]

The idea of poetry or poetic inspiration not just as mead, but as noisy, deafening liquid that crashes around loudly inside the poet’s mouth as it bubbles forth demanding release is an idea sometimes found in skaldic poetry that skálds could use in their opening stanzas. Arnorr jarlaskáld, for example, says:

\(^{347}\) Finnegan, ‘What is Oral Literature Anyway?’, p. 272.
\(^{348}\) The Indian Soma is also related to the Old Norse mjǫðr linguistically. The Sanksrit name for Soma is Madhu, which is cognate with Old Norse mjǫðr. See: Sváva Jakobsdóttir, ‘Gunnlǫð and the Precious Mead. [Hávamál]’, trans. K. Atwood in Essays in Old Norse Mythology, ed. P. Acker and C. Larrington (London, 2002), pp. 48-50.
\(^{349}\) To watch Benjamin Zephaniah perform the whole poem live, see: Dis Poetry, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2jSG2dmdFs (viewed 25 November, 2014). The text is my own transcription of Zephaniah’s performance.
Nú hykk slíðrhuga <s> segja
- sīð lettir mér stríða;
þýtr Alfoður - ýtum
jarls kostu - brim hrosta.\textsuperscript{350}

(Now I plan to tell men - long takes my pain to ease - the virtues of the hostile earl -
All-father’s malt-surf [> the mead of poetry] pounds [> resounds].)\textsuperscript{351}

Similarly, the poet Ref also says:

Grjótaldar ték gildi
geðreinar þórsteini.
Berg-Mæra glymr bára,
bið ek lýða kyn hlýða.\textsuperscript{352}

(I offer Thorstein feast [>mead] of rock-men’s [>giants] thought-land [>breast ]; fell
Mærir’s [>giants] wave [>the mead] crashes [>poetry resounds], I bid mankind
listen.)\textsuperscript{353}

Skaldic poetry is thus envisioned not just as a liquid object, but as something tangibly loud
and uncontrollable, an uncontainable force within the as yet unmoving, unspeaking human
mouth; in short, it is seen by the poet in terms of physical sound, like a roaring ocean,
pounding at the teeth and desperate to be released.

As noted above, the image of poetry as a liquid object associated with sound is
neither a unique nor original metaphor found only in the verses of one or two skálds. The
idea is in fact a basic yet crucial part of skaldic tradition and diction, and particularly praise
poetry: indeed, the myth of Óðinn’s mead, Kvasir’s blood and the dwarfs’ brew form the
base-layer for skálds thinking about and describing the act of poetic composition and
recitation.\textsuperscript{354} The myth underlines that as mead brewed by giants and stolen by Óðinn,

\textsuperscript{350} Skáldskaparmál (ed. Faulkes, p. 2, verse 1).
\textsuperscript{351} Edda: Snorri Sturluson (trans. Faulkes, p. 66).
\textsuperscript{352} Skáldskaparmál (ed. Faulkes, p. 12. verse. 30).
\textsuperscript{353} Edda: Snorri Sturluson (trans. Faulkes, p. 70).
\textsuperscript{354} All of these involve the same liquid object, but relate to the various stages of its processing, from raw
material [blood] to the finished product [the mead that appears in the hall].
poetry is an intoxicating liquid that emanates from the divine sphere of the gods or, in other words, supernatural beings. Poetic mead thus takes on important socio-religious significance: it is no soft-drink for general consumption, but an intoxicating liquid that belongs to a higher sphere as a semi-sacred and powerful substance to be consumed only by the gods and a few gifted creative men. As Snorri writes in Skáldságr, Óðinn only gave Suttungr’s mead Ásnum ok þeim mænum er yrkja kunnu\(^\text{355}\) (to the Æsir and to those people who are skilled at composing poetry.)\(^\text{356}\)

Arguably, skálds would thus have been distinguished from ordinary men not only because they had symbolically drunk the magical otherworldly mead (Whilst other lesser beings might have tasted the less-enticing skáldfífla hlut), but because theirs was the language of the gods. Indeed, in Ynglinga saga it is said that Óðinn speaks only in rhymes: Mælti hann allt hendingum, svá sem nú er þat kvæðit, er skáldskapr heittir (He spoke only in rhymes, which is now the case in what is called poetry.)\(^\text{357}\) It is also noteworthy that most of what is said by the other gods in the extant mythic sources also tends to take the form of rhythmic, alliterative eddic poetry: essentially, it would seem that poetry was viewed as being essentially the language of the gods. As such, the poetic mead is thus more than just our post-Romantic notions of ‘inspiration’ that rattles the poet’s teeth and is bursting to spill forth. Not only did skaldic verse function as heightened, elevated speech but it stepped out of the ordinary altogether, becoming a liminal language that tripped off the poet’s tongue and bordered on the words of the gods and language of Óðinn.

In short, as the skáld stepped into the liminal role of poet-performer and mouthpiece of Óðinn’s art, he would have brought into play important social, political and religious functions for those watching and listening to his performance. As the name dróttkvætt (‘court poetry’) and Snorri’s aforementioned notion of þeim mænum er yrkja kunnu suggest, pre-Christian skaldic praise poetry was unlikely to have been intended for a general audience. Instead, modern scholars assume that this verse was mostly composed and recited both for and amongst political leaders, chieftains and a warrior elite: essentially,
others who were chosen and favoured as ‘special’ by Óðinn.\(^{358}\) Considering that skálds and their poems may have been understood by both the skáld himself and his audience as somehow being closer to the divine world, it seems reasonable to suggest that in live performance the skáld formed an important link between this world — the world of the ninth- and tenth-century Norwegian court, for example — and the divine or ‘other’ world of supernatural beings. For those present at a skaldic performance, it might be said that the mere musicality and sound of skaldic poetry being uttered was enough to trigger a cognitive switch (that is, from ‘ordinary’ to ‘poetic’ language) and invoke a semi-sacred atmosphere imbued with ritual significance (see Chapter 2.5). As the performer began to speak in the Óðinn-inspired language of the gods, then it seems likely that the audience would also have been brought into the liminal performance sphere with him (in a similar way to what happens more directly in a poem like Vafþrúðnismál which would momentarily transform the hall where it is being performed into Vafþrúðnir’s hall).\(^{359}\)

M. L. West offers a valuable insight into the mythological and religious associations of skaldic verse in pre-Christian Scandinavia. West argues that the supernatural association with skaldic poetry and performance is not unique to the Norse tradition, but is in fact a common trait amongst all Indo-European poetry in which the poet is somehow removed from the ‘ordinary sphere’ as someone who is: ‘gifted with special knowledge, perhaps through an altered state of consciousness.’\(^{360}\) West uses linguistic evidence to suggest that the poet had a dual function as both issuing praise (or blame) as well as occupying an important religious role as a priest, shaman, druid or seer.\(^{361}\) As West notes, according to Snorri in Ynglingasaga, Óðinn’s so-called ‘priests’ were reportedly known as ljóðasmiðir (‘song-smiths’), and this corresponds with Indo-European Celtic tradition in which the dryidaí (‘druids’) were philosophers and priests who both presided over sacrifices and educated young men in oral poetry. In early Irish, a vates (Latin Vatis; Irish fáith; Welsh gwawd) was also a ‘seer, prophet and inspired poet’ although according to West, this role

\(^{358}\) Lindow, ‘Riddles, Kennings and the Complexity of Skaldic Poetry’, p. 323.

\(^{359}\) Gunnell, ‘Hof, hól, goð(ar) and dvergar’, pp. 187-97.

\(^{360}\) West, M. L., Indo-European Poetry and Myth (Oxford, 2007), p. 29. The ‘altered state of consciousness’ raises the question of whether the poetic mead was purely a motif or whether skálds, in the busy feasting hall, sometimes needed a few glasses to loosen their tongue! Of course, on a more serious note, religious practitioners such as shamans are known to take mind-altering substances to aid trance-like experiences during rituals. See: Eliade, M., Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy, trans. W. R. Trask (New York, 1964).

\(^{361}\) West. Indo-European Poetry and Myth, pp. 27-9.
was eventually reduced to spells and lower-poetry. More importantly, however, the word vates is related to the Gothic wōbs (‘possessed’), the Old English wod (‘frenzied’; cf. wōd ‘song’) and the Old Norse óðr (‘possessed, inspired; mind, poetry; wild, frenzied, mad’) the latter of which of course relates to the name of Óðinn himself, thereby again demonstrating the Germanic link between poetry and possession, in addition to the wider earlier Indo-European association of poets with religious or priest-like roles.

The association between poetry and possession and ecstasy (also of course attested to by Shakespeare) is another aspect of the connection between poetry and mead. Naturally, the hall setting where most skaldic poetry would have been performed was also one in which the drinking of alcohol was a central feature for all those involved, both audience and performer, something that would have merely strengthened the associations between poetic performance, ecstasy and liminality. All in all, even when ‘pagan’ beliefs in Scandinavia were fading or lost, it is clear that the memory of poetry’s divine associations remained entrenched in skaldic diction and imagery, and would have lingered on in the popular perceptions of the poet and his creations. The conception of skaldic poetry as a supernatural liquid linked to the world of the gods (and later God) would thus have had an important role to play in poetic performance at court or elsewhere. It would have had both social, political and religious implications for all of those involved.

Pre-Christian skálds, however, did not confine their conception of poetry to that of an unruly and turbulent liquid force from the gods which was constantly threatening to spew forth. Many compare the creation itself as a physical object that (once it had rushed forth like liquid) needed to be crafted and shaped by means of hammering and smithying. Kari Ellen Gade notes, for example, that the verbs smíða (‘to forge’), stofna (‘to work, do

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362 West, *Indo-Europaen Poetry and Myth*, p. 27.
364 I would like to thank Terry Gunnell for drawing my attention to the following quote from William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*:

“The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of imagination all compact.
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold—
That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic,
Sees Helen’s beauty in a brow of Egypt.
The poet’s eye, in fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to Earth, from Earth to heaven.
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
woodwork’) and fæja (‘to colour, polish’) are common native expressions used to describe
the process of poetic composition.\textsuperscript{365} The skálds themselves sometimes used imagery
relating to craft and construction to describe their poetry. Egill, for example, says in strophe
5 of his famous poem Sonatorrek:

\begin{verbatim}
þó munk mitt
ok móður hrør
fǫður fall
fyrst of telja,
þat berk út
ór orðhofi
mæðor timbr
máli laufgat.\textsuperscript{366}
\end{verbatim}

(Yet I shall first recount my father’s death and my mother’s loss, carry from
my word-shrine the timber that I build my poem from, leaved with
language.)\textsuperscript{367}

Halar-Stein’s verse demonstrates a similar idea:

\begin{verbatim}
Svalteigar mun selju
salts Viðblinda galtar
rafkastandi rastar
reyrþvens muna lengi\textsuperscript{368}
\end{verbatim}

(I have smoothed with poetry’s plane my refrain-ship’s [poem’s] prow [beginning], careful in my craftsmanship, for ale-vessel’s Bil [the woman],
fair bowl-forest [lady].)\textsuperscript{369}

\textsuperscript{365} Both Old Norse and English translations are taken from Gade, \textit{The Structure of Old Norse Dróttkvætt Poetry}, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{366} Egil’s saga (ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 248).
\textsuperscript{367} Egil’s saga (trans. B. Scudder in \textit{The Complete Sagas of Icelanders}, p. 153).
\textsuperscript{368} Skáldskaparmál (ed. Faulkes, p. 63, verse 201).
\textsuperscript{369} Edda: Snorri Sturluson (trans. Faulkes, p. 115).
The idea of the poet as a carpenter or smith was once again old. As M. L. West notes, it is, in fact, common to Indo-European poetry. West gives examples of Welsh bards being seen as seiri gwawd / cerdd ('carpenters of song'); of how the Greek poet Pindar talks of: ‘resounding verses such as skilled carpenters have joined together’; and notes words taken from the Indian Rig Veda: ‘I have thought out the song like a carpenter.’ In Old Icelandic, the skáld is often envisioned as a ljóðasmiðr ('song smith) or galdasmiðr ('spell-smith'), Bragi Boddasson being described as was frumsmið bragar ('proto-smith of poetry'). West also notes that in Indo-European poetry, poetry was often described as a ‘craft’ that echoed weaving, something seen in the use of words like Latin textere (to weave, plait; or build wooden structures), the Irish cerd (craftsmen), and the Welsh gweu ('weave' > ‘poetic composition’) when referring to it. Snorri even uses this idea in strophe 68 of his written poem Háttatal, where he says that he is putting together a ‘many-stranded encomium’ (mærð fjölsnærða). That a skáld not only saw his poetry as crafted work, but also viewed himself as a carpenter or smith is evinced in a verse by the frumsmið bragar, Bragi, himself:


Skáld kalla mik
skapsmiðr Viðurs,
Gauts gjafrotuð,
grepp ohneppan,
Yggs ǫlbera,
óðs skap-Móða,
hagsmiðr bragar.
Hvat er skáld nema þat? 

370 Quotes taken from West, Indo-European Poetry and Myth, p. 39. Note the Greek use of a word meaning resounding here, which once again underlines the idea of sound as discussed above.
371 Quote taken from West, Indo-European Poetry and Myth, p. 38.
372 Skáldskaparmál (ed. Faulkes, p. 19); noted by West, Indo-European Poetry and Myth, p. 39.
373 Háttatal (ed. Faulkes, p. 29, verse 68) also noted in West, Indo-European Poetry and Myth, pp. 36-8. Of course, Snorri composed Háttatal in a medieval literary period, probably taking inspiration from Latin and Greek sources, so perhaps this connection should be treated with caution.
If the skálds perceived their poetry as raw-material drawing on supernatural forces that had to be hammered and crafted into shape, then it seems natural that skálds should not simply plane and smooth the edges of their verse, but also occasionally ‘build’ their poems up into imposing, hand-crafted physical objects to remain in the minds of their audiences (if not their eyes). It is clear that the skálds did not view their works of art as something that appeared fully constructed out of nowhere. As Kari Ellen Gade argues, skálds perceived dróttkvætt not merely as words but as a ‘sounded object’ that moved forwards (if not upwards) on a concrete, physical level. Noting the frequency of the verbs stíga (‘to step, rise, move’) and flytja fram (‘to move forward, set in motion’) in saga prose to describe the process of skaldic recitation, Gade concludes that the dróttkvætt poem was thus often envisioned as a material entity, a concrete physical object set in motion by the performing skáld. The skálds do not make, of course, any mention of lines or page-typography or silent black and white symbols like those that appear to the modern reader static on the page. Instead, the skaldic conception of poetry seems to have been often that of a ship or vessel which has been transformed from raw wooden-material into a physical moving object that rides on the water, thereby expounding the idea of poetry as a hand-crafted object which is ready to ‘launch forward’ and set sail into the acoustic ether as it is performed. As Einar skálaglamm says:

\[Hljóta mun ek (ne hlítit)\]

\[Hertýs (of þat frýju)\]

\[fyrir orþeysi at ausa\]

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376 Gade, The Structure of Old Norse Dróttkvætt Poetry, p. 23.
378 Guðrún Nordal similarly notes that ‘Sailing imagery is important in kennings for poetry in late skaldic verse. The poet commonly compares his tongue to oars, his mouth to the harbour, and his poetry to the ship.’ which further supports the argument that poets often conceived of their poems as concrete physical objects that moved. See: Nordal, Tools of Literacy, p. 27.
austr víngnoðar flausta.\textsuperscript{379}

(I shall succeed in bailing the draught of Host-Tyr’s [> Öðinn’s] wine-vessel [> the mead of poetry] before the ship impellers [> seamen] — I need no urging in that.)\textsuperscript{380}

Egill Skallagrímsson uses a similar conception in the following strophe:

\begin{verbatim}
Vestr fork of ver,
en ek Viðris ber
munstrandar mar,
svá’s mitt of far;
drók eik á flot
við isa brot,
hlóðk mæðar hlut
mins knarrar skut.\textsuperscript{381}
\end{verbatim}

(West over water I fared, bearing poetry’s waves [> mead of poetry] of the war-god’s [> Öðinn’s] heart; my course was set. I launched my oaken craft, at the breaking of ice, loaded my cargo of praise aboard my longboat.)\textsuperscript{382}

Snorri Sturluson attributes the idea of poetry as a ship to word-play which connects the ‘ship’ with poetic mead:

\begin{verbatim}
Enn kallaðar skalskaprinn far eða lið dverganna; lið heitir Ǫl ok lið heitir skip. Svá er tekit til dæma at skaldskapr er nú kallaðar furir þvi dverga, sva sem hér segir:
Bæði á ek til brúðar
bergjarls ok skip dverga
sollinn vind at senda
seunfyrn götu eina.\textsuperscript{383}
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{379} Skáldskaparmál (ed. Faulkes, p. 10, verse 18).
\textsuperscript{380} Edda: Snorri Sturluson (trans. Faulkes, p.68).
\textsuperscript{381} Egils saga (ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 185).
\textsuperscript{382} Egil’s saga (trans. Scudder, p. 118).
Poetry is also called the dwarf’s vessel or líð. Líð is a word for ale and líð is a word for ships. This is the origin of the expression whereby poetry is now as a result called dwarf’s ship, as it says here: “I have ready both swollen wind of rock-earl’s [= giant’s] bride [= troll-wife’s wind is ‘thought’] and unforgettable dwarf’s ship to send the same way.”384

In fact, M. L. West demonstrates that the concept of poetry not only as a ‘ship’, but as various moving objects such as chariots and wagons was a common feature of Indo-European poetry. He points, for example, to the following example from some early Indian poetry: ‘for Indra and Agni I set my eloquence going: I drive it forwards like a ship on the river with my songs.’385 West also notes that how the Greek poet Bacchylides announces that his muse has sent him a ‘cargo ship’ laden with songs for him to steer.386 West adds that in Greek and Indian poetry, a poem (as a ship or chariot) is also often said to require a smooth path to travel, noting that, for example, one finds ‘in Græco-Aryan poetry the idea that the song is something that moves forward and travels a course.’387

There is thus reason to wonder whether skaldic poetry and its associations with a carefully built object that moves were merely the result of a word-play (see líð above) as Snorri suggests, or whether it might have been an important, ancient feature within the native conception of skaldic verse that has much earlier roots in Indo-European conceptions, as West suggests. Certainly, for Scandinavian raiders, traders and coastal settlers from the Bronze Age onwards, the ship was not only an important part of everyday life, but a significant symbol within their social and cultural mentality.388 For pre-Christian Scandinavian society, the ship might have conjured up images of exciting journeys from one place to another, from the known to the unknown across what would sometimes be a vast expanse of deep sea — a mysterious, liminal and otherworldly zone linking this land with land beyond the horizon that was out of sight.

385 West, Indo-European Poetry and Myth, p. 41.
386 West, Indo-European Poetry and Myth, p. 41.
387 West, Indo-European Poetry and Myth, p. 43.
388 See, for example: Gelling, P., and H. E. Davidson, The Chariot of the Sun, and Other Rites and Symbols of the Northern Bronze Age (London, 1969).
For skálds working within this social context, incorporating the ‘ship’ metaphor into their verse served not only as an artistic exercise, but also offered a useful way of thinking about skaldic verse in the absence of pen and paper. If poetry, once it had ‘burst forth’ from the poet’s mouth and been hammered into place, was a ship then the beginning of skaldic performance – the moment that the first noisy, crashing sounds were uttered or ‘released’ – would represent the ship being launched and beginning its journey forward. Once the poetic ship had sailed from the poet-port, it would thus make its way across the performance space until it reached the other side, where the memory of the poem could be received safely at harbour having been experienced and taken in by the eyes and ears of the audience. It is here, after the point of acoustic reception, that the ‘cargo’ of the poem – in the form of praise, record and sound – would have been unloaded, and could be taken into new ownership and passed on. In fact, Diana Whaley alludes to the idea of skaldic poetry as a commodity, and indeed the very notion of a poet ‘handing over’ a praise-poem in exchange for money suggests that poetry could also be traded in the same way as a material object or a ship’s precious ‘cargo’.  

Skaldic poetry in every sense was therefore never regarded as written poetry or words on the page during the period in which it was composed. Even in the midst of Icelandic literary activity it appears that the earlier native conception of skaldic poetry was to some extent maintained. Although writing in the thirteenth-century, Ólafr Þórðarson elaborates on the earlier skaldic conception of poetry as a ship, although (like Snorri), he does not seem to be thinking of its physical movement within oral performance. Ólafr is more concerned with poetry’s technical construction when he writes:

\[
\text{þæssi figura ær miðk hófð i mals sníldar list, ær rethorica hæitir, oc ær hon uphaf til kvanðandi þeirrar, æ saman helldr norænum skalldkap, sva sæm naglar hallda skipi sama, ær smiðr gerir, ok ferr sundrast ælla borð fra borði. sva hælldr ok þessi figura saman kveðandi iskalldskap með stofum þeim ær stuðlar hæita ok hofuðstafir. hin fyrri figura gerir fægrð með lioðs greinum iskalld skap, sva sæm fælling skips borða.}
\]

Of course, as Guðrún Nordal and Margaret Clunies-Ross argue, skaldic poetry took on a new function during the thirteenth-century when it was used in a literary context for literary and scholastic purposes. But even in its new literary role, even in the written poem Háttatal, it seems clear that skaldic poetry continued to be thought of in terms of sound rather than silent symbols: See ChapterS 1.4-1.5.
Ænn þo ærv fastir viðir saman, þeir sem negldir ærv, at æigi sæ væl fælldir, sæm kvæðandi hællz I hændingarlausum hattum.\(^{391}\)

(‘This figure is much used in the art of eloquence known as Rhetorica, and it forms the origin of the alliteration that holds together Norse poetry. Just as the nails hold together a ship made by a builder, in which otherwise the boards would fall asunder, likewise this figure holds together the alliteration of poetry, by means of the letters which are called stuðlar (‘supporters’) and hǫfuðstafir (‘head-staves’). The former figure (paronomasia) embellishes poetry by means of a variety of sounds, and can be compared to the joining of a ship’s boards. And yet boards that are nailed together are fast, even though not joined by tongue and groove, just as alliteration is maintained in rhymeless metres.’\(^{392}\)

Ólafr was, of course, writing with a specific agenda in mind, as his goal was to demonstrate the similarities between skaldic poetry and rules of versification in Classical poetry. Ólafr’s metaphor or image of poetry as a ‘ship’ is largely in keeping with the skaldic references and prose descriptions of poetry moving forward and rising (as noted above), suggesting that poetry was considered by skálds not as an abstract concept, but as a concrete physical object, not unlike a ship. It is worth noting that the elements of physical construction and building also remain in Ólafr’s ship metaphor, as does the element of movement (even though here that is largely limited to the act of construction itself rather than the movement of the ship across the water). Also worth noting is that Ólafr’s metaphorical ship is constructed (like real ships) from the bottom up, not from the top down as written poetry appears on a page. If, as Ólafr suggests, nails are alliterative sound holding the poetic ship together, then its stuðlar (‘props’) would have served as strong foundation pillars which stood below the hǫfuðstaðir (‘head-staves’), demonstrating that Ólafr envisions parts of the poem (his ‘ship’) being built on top of one another. The timber or ‘text’ of each ‘line’ of the poem would have overlapped with the previous one, building up poetic layer upon layer as the poem grew increasingly higher (towards the sky).  

\(^{391}\) Quote taken from Nordal, *Tools of Literacy*, p. 251.  
\(^{392}\) Translation taken from Nordal, *Tools of Literacy*, p. 251.
It seems clear from the source material that these ships of poetry that the skálds were constructing were not empty vessels, however: these moving poetic objects carried explosive, high-voltage cargo that took the form of the language of the gods, and had the power to make or shatter a person’s reputation. That words had damaging potential and could remain remain in an immediate audience’s (or wider cultural) memory is well-attested in Old Norse poetry. This is perhaps most clearly seen in the senna, a verbal duel where the poets’ words were like weapons and their tongues were razor-sharp. The apparently popular phenomenon of verbal duelling was part of a shared game and a ritual exchange of abuse that could turn deadly if one contestant overstepped the mark. Like a modern-day rap contests, the senna relied on verbal manoeuvres and the spoken word to hit its opponents hard. Similarly, slanderous verses such as níð or erotic love-poems such as manspøngr made a direct comment on another person that, if circulated, could be worse than general gossip. After all, once a poem (and particularly an alliterative poem) is uttered in any time or place, it is given material form and concrete existence in people’s minds (accompanied by their visual memories of performance) and so, unlike the written word, the oral sounding of a poem cannot be so easily erased from the minds of those who hear it. In a social climate where the balance of power resided on reputation and honour, it seems reasonable to argue that skálds and skaldic audiences did not only understand live skaldic poetry as a moving physical object: they also understood poetry as an unstoppable, powerful force that the silent written text could not even begin to compete with.

If we wish to fully understand the native contemporary conception of skaldic poetry prior to the advent of writing, it is important to realise that attitudes towards poetry in a pre-literate cultural environment require a completely different mode of understanding from that of a literate mind-set. Walter Ong argues that a ‘primary oral culture’ is a society untouched by the written word and as such engages radically different thought-patterns to a literary culture. Ong demonstrates that an oral culture relies on memory and instant recall for the transmission of important information (such as the law, medicine, history and wisdom) and, as a result, thought becomes heavily repetitive, alliterative and rhythmic as a means of helping memory (because it is thought that the mind retains such sound patterns

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393 Harris, ‘The Senna: from Description to Literary Theory’, pp. 65-74.
394 Ong, Orality and Literacy, p. 30.
better than non-rhymed or un-alliterative poetry/prose). In primary oral cultures, thought thus tends to become organised around formulas and set expressions. Ong argues that literacy, on the other hand, transforms consciousness and produces thought-patterns only possible with the technology of writing.

Skaldic poetry with its strict metrical rules, internal rhyme and alliteration echoes the forms that develop in an oral culture. It seems reasonable to suggest that skaldic poetry could thus have served as an important tool to preserve important social, political and cultural knowledge relating to an historical event, like a battle or religious conversion. It is also clear from extant texts that a skaldic poem was made to be remembered. Eyvindr skáldaspíllir Finnsson, one of Jarl Hákon’s court skálds, for example, makes a proud boast that his praise poem Háleygjatal will be remembered sem steinabrú (‘as a stone bridge’), in other words as a sturdy, physical object that, interestingly enough, unlike the ship metaphors, is strong and unmoving but nonetheless links places across flowing water. As a solid stone marker, however, Eyvindr’s poem is clearly not designed to go anywhere: it is designed to stay as a towering monument anchored to the spot.

The point of the above discussion is to underline that when analysing pre-Christian skaldic verse composed and recited in a predominantly oral environment, it is important not to force a literary mind-set or model onto poetry which was conceived within a mentality that differs from the modern Western understanding of poetry. Despite the manuscript preservation and scholarly presentation of skaldic verse as page-poetry, it appears that in almost every sense the native conception of skaldic poetry was quite different to that of a static book-bound text or as words on a page designed to be read from top to bottom. Skaldic poetry was viewed as being essentially liquid in its raw form, later turning (like lava or mud) into a solid, physical object that was carefully constructed from the materials that issued from the poet’s mouth. These materials were then hammered together in order to remain in the memories of the listeners as a finished object: once the skaldic performer

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395 Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 34.
397 The final verse of Eyvindr skáldaspíllir’s poem Háleygjatal reads as follows:

Jólna sumbl
enn vér gótum
stillis lof
sem steinabrú.

‘We (I) have produced /once more a feast of the gods [ > poetry] / praise of the ruler / like a bridge of stones.’ (trans. and ed. R. Poole in *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas I*, p. 212).
opened his mouth, the poem essentially ‘set sail’, travelling directly towards the senses and minds of the watching, listening audience, and simultaneously, temporarily transporting them into a liminal space between gods and men.
3.1. Toward a Definition: Defining the Term ‘Performance’

In her revolutionary approach to poetry and performance, the Austrian academic Julia Novak defines live poetry as ‘a specific manifestation of poetry’s oral mode of realisation that is characterised by the direct encounter of the poet with a live audience’ (see Chapter 2). Russell Thompson, the Programme Co-ordinator for the UK’s leading Performance Poetry organisation Apples and Snakes, similarly argues that in live poetry, ‘you acknowledge that an audience is there.’ According to Novak, however, in live poetry the poet not only acknowledges the audience but also actively engages with them: unlike theatre, there is no proscenium arch or invisible ‘fourth wall’ for the poet to hide behind, so he or she has to confront their audience directly. Unlike in silent literary poetry, in live poetry performance the poet is not an evoked or imagined voice but a real voice speaking not only with his or her mouth but also with their eyes, gestures, body language, costume, facial expression gender, age and ethnicity. Unlike in drama, however, in live performance the poet is neither ‘acting’ nor impersonating a fictional character. Instead, he or she is presenting him- or herself (or a version of him- or herself, in the role of poet-performer), among other things, by showing off their skills and putting, as Richard Bauman argues, ‘the act of speaking on display.’ In short, in all live poetry, the poet is going to be some kind of performer and his or her poetry a performance. In terms of skaldic verse, it thus seems that the phrase live poetry or performance poetry can be applied to the phenomenon of skálds composing praise to be recited orally in front of the king and court audience, whilst the skáld himself can be regarded as a performer (see Chapters 2.1-2.6).

Of course, the terms performance and performance poetry are not without debate. In her article ‘Is Performance Poetry Dead?’ Cornelia Grabner summarises two different views of the characteristics of performance poetry that were articulated during a debate between two performance poets at Poetry International (2006) at London’s South Bank

\[^{398}^\text{Novak, Live Poetry, p. 12.}\]
\[^{400}^\text{Novak, Live Poetry, p. 59.}\]
\[^{401}^\text{Novak, Live Poetry, p. 37 and pp. 145-67.}\]
\[^{402}^\text{Bauman, Verbal Art as Performance, p. 83.}\]
Centre. Luke Wright, according to Grabner, emphasised the importance of the performer in live poetry: ‘[performance poetry is] poetry that mobilizes [sic] not a reading but a speaking voice, and which puts the word in contact with music, non-musical sounds, visual elements and theatrical devices.’ Lemn Sissay, on the other hand, argued that there has been too much emphasis on the musical, showy elements of performance poetry at the risk of overlooking the meaning of the poem itself: ‘[the showy element of performance] has received so much emphasis that it drowns out the actual work with words.’

Whilst Sissay and Wright’s comments typify the two different opinions currently dividing those active in the live poetry scene, the problem with both of these opinions is that neither offers a thorough definition of performance. As Grabner argues, when it comes down to it, the controversy surrounding performance poetry ultimately ‘hinges on what different parties mean by the term performance.’ In fact, it seems that this superficial definition of performance is a problem in many areas throughout academia, as scholars often seem to throw the term performance around without really considering the meaning of the term and its deeper implications. Oral scholars such as John Miles Foley, for example, argue that all oral poetry is performance in some form or another. On the other hand, poetry scholars such as Charles Bernstein often use a different kind of terminology, referring to the poetry reading as a ‘performative event’ and poems as ‘multiple performances’ without really engaging with what performance is beyond sounds and action. I too have argued above (see Chapter 2) that skaldic poetry, composed and transmitted in a wholly-oral environment, should be treated as live performance or performance poetry without offering a thorough definition of what actually I actually mean by the term performance.

Before going further in my analysis of skaldic poetry as live performance, it is thus important to take a brief detour and consider the new and vibrant academic field known as Performance Studies, which not only looks at performance as a phenomenon in itself, but also ‘seeks to break the code of what happens in all dimensions of the [performance] event.

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406 See, for example, Charles Bernstein’s opinion, as discussed in Chapter 2. Unlike Novak, who believes that the performer is at the centre of a live poetry reading, Bernstein argues that the performer is merely a channel, a medium to articulate the focus of the event, which is the poem itself.
408 See Chapter 1.7.
from the verbal component through the non-verbal dimensions of music, physical gesture, costume, and other constitutive aspects of what’s happening. It seeks to read the signs, whatever the signs may be.409 By taking a closer look at how Performance Studies deals with the concept of performer and performance, I hope to not only enhance our understanding of ‘performance’, but also explore how performance-orientated methodologies are absolutely necessary when analysing the phenomenon of live or performance poetry, such as skaldic verse, even in its extant written form.

3.2. What is Performance?

As noted above in Chapter 2.2., performance exists above and beyond any book: it cannot be represented by silent black and white symbols and it is not a physical object that can be fixed to the page. Instead, performance is a process that involves action and sound; it is a live exchange and communal experience between the performer and audience, encompassing a range of senses beyond the internal isolation of silent sight-reading. In a more technical sense, performance can be described as the ‘presentation of rehearsed or pre-established sequences of words or actions.’410 With this more technical definition in mind, performance can thus be considered as a process that involves the performer presenting or showing, whether consciously or unconsciously, a series of actions and movements to his or her audience: in other words, showing what Schechner calls ‘being-doing’.411 Of course, all performance takes place in a physical location or place, but it also creates its own space: by marking itself off as separate from ordinary, everyday behaviour, performance thus has the ability to form its own stage. Whether a formal and organised performance (such as a football game or religious ceremony) or an unplanned, seemingly spontaneous performance (such as an Irish storyteller in a pub, or the telling of a joke), the space that a performance establishes comes with its own rules and boundaries, and is always clearly temporally framed by a beginning and an end.412

410 Bial, H., ‘What is Performance?’ in *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. H. Bial (London, 2004), p. 59. This definition, which suggests that performance is a series of ready-made actions that can be employed consciously or unconsciously by the performer, is a definition that is in keeping with Schechner’s concept of ‘restored behaviour’ (or ‘twice-behaved’ behaviour). That is, a ‘repertory’ of previously learnt skills that are never repeated, just re-shaped and re-used (usually without knowing) by the performer. See: Schechner, *Performance Studies*, pp. 28-30.
412 For further discussion, see: Schechner, *Performance Studies*, pp. 52-88 and pp. 89-121.
What goes on during the performance itself can be described as *liminal* or *liminoid*, depending on how literally one wants to take Victor Turner’s and Arnold van Gennep’s definitions of liminality. While the liminal phase is traditionally associated with religious rituals and ritual transformation, in terms of Performance Studies this term can be modified to encompass any state of the suspension of reality in which the players — either performer or audience — are in a state of being both ‘betwixt and between’, regardless of whether this state carries religious implications or not. Furthermore, performance can be seen as a process that follows a tripartite structure involving *proto-performance* (in other words, the context surrounding the building up to the live performance such as the composition, learning and also rehearsal); the *performance itself*; and what is sometimes called the *aftermath* (which involves the archive or memory of the performance, in addition to the audience’s immediate and/or delayed critical response). Whilst the *frames* or frameworks encircling this sequential structure (such as play, ritual, games/sports, art, politics or even everyday behaviour) may vary, ultimately every performance will serve a specific function (sometimes several), depending on where it situates itself on what Schechner calls the ‘efficacy-entertainment’ dyad or ‘ritual-play’ spectrum (see below). As such, it is possible to argue that performance is not simply the experience of live sounds and action: it also has the ability to transform and transport an audience, to set up imaginary boundaries and to invoke some sort of change, whether temporary or permanent.

It is thus clear that performance is more than just moving one’s mouth and waving one’s arms around. In Performance Studies, the meaning of performance is much more complex and multi-layered. Schechner looks beyond simply *doing* (producing sounds and action), and argues that all performance should be analysed in terms of function which can be placed on a spectrum or viewed as a ‘double-helix’ with ritual at one end and play at the other. In terms of ritual, which is the first strand of this ‘double helix’, Roy Rappaport notes that ritual performance is characterised by its repetitive and stylised actions, and

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416 This is one of the central ideas behind Performance Studies Theory and, as such, it is a concept that I will bear in mind when analysing skaldic poetry in Chapter 4.

417 Schechner, *Performance Studies*, p. 80
follows a strict structure of formal, sequential acts. More importantly, the function of ritual is to effect permanent, transformative change for its participants. Following on from the earlier theories of Arnold van Gennep, the social anthropologist Victor Turner has argued that during ritual initiation ceremonies, participants experience a state of liminality (see above), a state of being both ‘betwixt and between’. During the liminal phase, participants are ‘ground down to nothing’ and the constraints of everyday life are relaxed (called anti-structures), allowing participants to enjoy a sense of communitas (a sense of community) and, ultimately, change. In the second strand of Schechner’s ‘double-helix’, however, performance can be categorised to varying degrees as a state of play, which also invokes a degree of liminality and sense of communitas. Characterised by its non-serious, creative and spontaneous nature, play also allows for the construction of an illusory world, a secondary reality fuelled by ‘make-belief’ or ‘make believe’, where its primary function is entertainment not efficacy, and its effect temporary not permanent.

With the function and effect of performance in mind, Schechner thus argues that performance is not simply restored behaviour but ‘ritualised behaviour conditioned or permeated by play’ with the different strands of this double helix — ritual and play — constricting and loosening depending on the performance context. Of course, the problem with analysing skaldic poetry according to Schechner and other Performance Studies theorists’ definition of performance is that, as written poetry, we have ultimately lost an important part of the poems and verses’ live performance context: modern scholars are not even left with their own memories or experiences of live skaldic performance. As such, by digging into what Schechner calls the aftermath or archives of performance — the written texts — we are forced to view skaldic verse through the lens of literature. There is

418 Schechner, Performance Studies, p. 53.
419 Turner has produced an impressive body of work, in particular several important essays relating to the ‘liminal’ phase during ritual. See, for example: Turner, V., ‘Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage’, in The Forest of Symbols (Ithaca and New York, 1967). In terms of performance, Schechner discusses Turner’s concept of ‘liminality’ and how it can be applied to Performance Theory in Performance Studies, p. 53.
421 Schechner, Performance Studies, pp. 70-2.
422 Henry Bial describes ‘play’ as ‘the force of uncertainty which counterbalances the structure provided by ritual.’ Bial, The Performance Studies Reader, p. 135. See also: Huizinga, J., ‘The Nature and Significance of Play as a Cultural Phenomenon. 1938’, in The Performance Studies Reader, pp. 137-40. In this article, Huizinga argues that ‘play’ is innate to culture, but is markedly separate from ordinary life and social construction. Instead, Huizinga argues that in play, by ‘giving expression to life man creates a second, poetic world alongside the world of nature’ , p. 139. See also: Schechner, Performance Studies, pp. 52-121.
423 Schechner, Performance Studies, p. 89.
no live stage or even a camera lens: it is the saga author who decides what aspects of the performance we see (if any), and it is modern editors who frame the original performative action as black and white letters on white paper. By combining a Performance Studies perspective with Gunnell’s *performance archaeology* (see Chapter 1.8) and Foley’s various oral theories, we can nonetheless attempt to ‘break the code’ and ‘read the signs’ of the shared experience that might have existed between *skálds* and their listening audience during their original live performances.\footnote{424}{Of course, the term ‘original’ is particularly problematic when dealing with a fluid oral tradition that we no longer have access to, such as skaldic poetry. Although we have named poets for individual poems and stanzas, the aim of this study is not to prove unprovable origins: instead, I use the word ‘original’ performance to refer to the ninth- and tenth-century context in which they were supposedly first composed, rather than how these poems might have worked in thirteenth-century performance before they came to be written down.}

### 3.3. What is Performance Studies?

By adopting a broad definition of the term *performance*, Performance Studies offers an important tool for the scholarly analysis of any sort of human behaviour that can be classed as *doing, showing or showing-doing*.\footnote{425}{In his analysis of the question ‘what is performance?’, Schechner argues that performance is quite simply *doing* something. Whereas *being* is existence, whether stationary or moving, it is only material reality. *Doing*, however, involves action whereas *showing-doing* (that is, presenting or ‘doing’ your actions for someone else to watch, receive and/or interpret is what Schechner calls *showing-doing*: or, in other words, *performance*). Nevertheless, Schechner notes that *showing-doing* (or ‘performance’) is in a state of perpetual change and constant flux, meaning that even though a ‘performer’ might be using the same building blocks or skills learnt (i.e. restored *behaviour*), no performance will ever be the same. This is a crucial point to remember when considering skaldic poetry: even if the *verbal text* of a poem remained unchanged, every performance would have been different. See: Schechner, *Performance Studies*, p.28.}

By placing an interpretive frame around an individual or group’s behaviour and surrounding context, it is possible to not only analyse all human behaviour as performance but also interrogate ‘social norms and/or the affirmation of cultural practices.’\footnote{426}{Grabner, ‘Is Performance Poetry Dead?’ p. 81.} Performance Studies is thus useful for not only understanding skaldic performance, but also the pre-Christian Scandinavian society governed by different social, cultural and political norms that produced and enjoyed it. Developed by American scholars and most notably Richard Schechner in the 1980s and 1990s, Performance Studies with its ‘broad-spectrum’ approach is a fluid, flexible and wide-open discipline that defies rigid definition.\footnote{427}{Schechner played a key role in reforming Performing Arts Programmes at American universities in the 1980s and 1990s, arguing for a more performance-orientated approach to the subject. Since then, Schechner has been active in developing the field of Performance Studies which has now grown into a wide field that, as a discipline, is characterised more by diversity and fluidity than rigidity and fixed convention. See: Schechner, *Performance Studies*, pp. 1-18; and ‘Performance Studies: the Broad Spectrum Approach’, in *The Performance Studies Reader*, pp. 7-10.}

Arguing that ‘any action that is framed, presented, highlighted or...
displayed is performance’, Schechner demonstrates that Performance Studies examines a wide-spectrum of activities including games, ritual, politics, sports and everyday behaviour, ‘from shamanism to surgery.’ The value of Performance Studies for the analysis of skaldic performance is thus that it does not ‘read’ a performance piece like one would a book, but questions its behaviour: Performance Studies asks not ‘what’ remains (that is, in the case of skaldic verse, a written text), but ‘why’ a piece was composed and ‘how’ it was experienced by those present.

In fact, Performance Studies in many ways moves away from the written word altogether. It was partly conceived as a reaction to Western scholarship, which Schechner criticises as being ‘wedded to the word’ (both written and spoken) stressing that Performance Studies seeks the ‘de-emphasising of literary, text-based criticism in favour of performance-based analysis.’ Indeed, some scholars such as Raymond Williams went as far as to criticise the ‘scriptocentric’ arrogance of the educated elite, whilst Dwight Conquergood argues that: ‘only middle-class academics could blithely assume that all the world is a text because reading and writing are central to the everyday experience.’ Whilst such views may seem a little harsh, not least for Old Norse studies who only have written texts to engage with, the value of Performance Studies is that it allows scholars to move beyond the written text by de-materialising the physical, static (in this case textual) object in order to find meaning in other non-verbal forms of expression. More importantly, Performance Studies’ concern with ‘de-emphasising of the written word’ allows for a noticeably more anthropological approach to skaldic performance. Richard Schechner himself argues that: ‘performative thinking must be seen as a means of cultural analysis.’ In terms of the analysis of skaldic verse, such a socio-cultural outlook can be extremely useful and informative for understanding not only the actual performance, but its role, its social and religious function, and its effect upon contemporary Old Norse audiences.

428 Schechner, Performance Studies, p. 2.
429 In terms of Old Norse scholarship, Terry Gunnell has already explained the value of Performance Studies approach, which prioritises experience over material remains, and explored how it can be applied to the analysis of eddic verse in more detail in ‘The Uses of Performance Studies for the Study of Old Norse Religion.’
430 Bial, The Performance Studies Reader, p. 5.
432 Schechner, Performance Studies, p. 8.
3.4. The Skaldic Experience: Poetry as Performance, not as Written Text

As stressed above, like eddic poetry all that remains of skaldic poetry are written texts. Occasionally, however, we may have a thirteenth- or fourteenth-century narrative framing a poem and, if we are lucky, the saga author may offer a tantalisingly terse insight into how the verse might have been performed in front of a live audience. Although Kari Ellen Gade argues that, as skaldic poetry was still alive in the thirteenth-century, the performance of skaldic verse as described by saga authors was probably relatively accurate even if it was stereotyped and idealised, we must nonetheless question the reliability of the saga author. Writing with a literary agenda in a medieval Christian environment, we must ask ourselves just how much we can trust the Icelandic saga authors’ literary representations of ninth- and tenth-century skaldic performance, and always analyse any descriptions of skaldic performance with this in mind. Nevertheless, the literary accounts that frame skaldic verse in saga narratives all emphasise one crucial thing: skaldic poetry was never intended to be composed and transmitted as written poetry. There is of course the odd saga reference to poetry being inscribed in runes, such as Hallmundarkviða in Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar, where it says: „Skaltu nú heyra til,” sagði hann, „en ek mun segja frá athofnum mínun, ok mun ek kveða þar um kvaði, en þú skalt rísta eptir á kefli.” (“You must listen now,” he said, “as I relate all my exploits. I shall recite a poem about them and want you to carve it out on a rune-stick.”) Similarly, in Egils saga there is an account that describes the apparent runic-recording of Egill’s poem Sonatorrek. Ultimately, however, the sagas make it abundantly clear that most skaldic poetry was composed, memorised and received both orally and aurally, without a pen or ink-pot in sight.

3.5. The Poetic Process: The ‘Proto-Performance’ of Oral Composition and Memorisation

From Somalia to Gibraltar, and from Eskimo poetry to coffee-shop slams, many modern poets toil for days over their poetic composition. According to the Icelandic sagas, Old Norse poets were no different. Kari Ellen Gade notes that in Egils saga, for example, the eponymous hero composes his life-saving poem Ḥǫfuðlausn (‘Head-ransom’) in one long,

436 See: Egil’s Saga (trans. Scudder, p. 151-6).
437 Finnegan, Oral Poetry, p.18.
laborious night whilst the title of Þjóðólfur of Hvin’s shield-poem Haustlǫng (‘Autumn-long’) suggests that his drápa was composed over the months of autumn. Gade also notes that some poetry could be composed over the course of winter, a time when poetic activity appeared to reach its peak. Examples given by Gade include the account in Egils saga, where the narrator describes how: eptir um vetrinn orti Egill drápu um skjaldargjöfina er kólluð er Berudrápa440 (‘during the winter Egill composed a drápa about his shield gift, which he called Berudrápa’). Ólafr Þórðarson similarly seems to have used the winter as a time to produce poetry, as Sturlunga saga states: Ólafr þórdarson hafði ort drápu um þórlak biskup um vetrinn næsta fyrir andlát Magnúss biskups442 (‘Ólafr Þórðarson had composed a drápa about the bishop Þórlakr during the winter before the death of the bishop Magnús’). Elsewhere, we read in Porleifs þáttar Jarlsskálds of how the poet Þorleifr states: Ek hefði kveðit vísur nökkurar í vetr, er ek kalla konuvísur er ek hefi ort um Hákon jarl444 (‘I have composed some verses during the winter, which I call konuvísur and which I have composed about Jarl Hákon’).

It is clear that court skálds spent a good degree of time composing their poetry and fixing it into their mind prior to recitation, not unlike modern performance poets such as Kate Tempest or John Cooper Clarke. Indeed, it seems that whole poems could be memorised as part of a growing repertoire by the skáld and later recalled for live performance. In Arnórs þáttr jarlaskálds, for example, the travelling poet Arnórr turns up at the Norwegian court and is asked to perform two poems that he had previously composed about King Haraldr hardráði and King Magnus. He begins one poem addressed to King Magnus and, when that one is finished, moves on to another: Ok nú eptir þetta, þá er

438 Gade, The Structure of Old Norse Dróttkvætt Poetry, p.22.
439 Gade, The Structure of Old Norse Dróttkvætt Poetry, p. 22. It would be interesting to explore whether there are any references in the sagas to poems being composed during the summer (or a period of ‘brightness’ and daylight): at the time of writing, I am not aware of any examples. The period of Christmas time or Yuletide (Icelandic jól) itself is well-documented in the sagas as a time of feasting with special ritual significance, but also later in medieval Nordic folk customs as a time of lively performance activity which might have had roots in the ‘pagan’ religion. Again, it would be interesting to examine whether there was a ritual or semi-religious aspect to the act of composing in darkness during such a time of religious significance. It might nonetheless have been that during the winter, people simply had more time to compose during the long, dark evenings when they were not outside as often as they were in the summer.
441Translation my own.
442 Sturlunga saga, quoted in Gade, The Structure of Old Norse Dróttkvætt Poetry, p. 22.
443Translation my own.
445Translation my own.
kvæðinu er lokit, hefr skálit upp Haralds kvæði, ok heitir þat Blágagladrápa, gott kvæði

(‘Then when the poem was finished, the poet began Haraldr’s poem, a good poem called the drápa of the Black Birds’). In Þórleifs þáttr jarlsskálds, we also read how the poet Þórleifr: gekk fyrir konung ok beiddi hann hlýða kvæði því, er hann hafði ort um hann. Konungr spurði, hvárt hann væri skáld […..] Þórleifr kvøð þá fertuga drápu (‘Þórleifr went to the king and asked him to listen to a poem he had made about him. Þórleifr then recited a drápa of forty stanzas’). Similarly, Hreiðars þáttr tells us thow the poet Hreiðr asks the king: „at þér hlýddið kvæði, er ek hefi ort um yðr“ (‘That you would listen, my lord, to a poem that I have composed about you’). In Einarss þáttr Skúlasonar, King Eysteinn asks the poet Einarr to compose praise poetry: Ok Eysteinn konungr bað hann til at yrkja Ólafsdrápu, ok hann orti ok foerði norðr í Prandheimi, í Kristskirkju sjálfrí, ok varð þat með miklum jarteinum, ok kom dýrligr ilme í kirkjuna (‘he asked Einarr to compose King Ólafr’s drápa. He composed it, and when he recited it in Christ Church itself, in Trondheim in the north, great portents occurred and a wonderful scent filled the church’).

As with the modern-day slam poet Sarah Kay or the famous rímur singer Steindór Andersen, it thus appears that most early Scandinavian skálds also engaged in the creative process of what Joseph Harris calls deliberative composition. In other words, rather than composing impromptu, it appears that skálds composed their poems in private and memorised them prior to live recitation. Nevertheless, it also seems that the tradition of memorising long, formally complex skaldic verse did not necessarily mean that the verbal text of a poem was set in stone: unlike a poem that has been penned to paper, an oral verse could be changed to suit its audience’s needs. Óttars þáttr svart, for example, offers an interesting example of such oral editing. In this þáttr, the poet Óttar is thrown into the king’s dungeon’s for three nights as a result of composing obscene love verses about the queen, but is then offered help by the poet Sighvatr. The account is as follows:

446 Morkinskinna I (ed. Ármann Jakobsson and Þórunn Guðjónsson, p. 146).
452 Morkinskinna I (ed. Ármann Jakobsson and Þórunn Ingi, p. 222).
453 The Tale of Arnor, the Poet of Earls (trans. Jesch, p. 337). This is a particularly interesting account as it mentions details of the performance space (the church) and even smell, offering a glimpse into the performance ‘event’ and its wider (i.e. more than simply verbal) context.
454 Harris’, Eddic as Oral Poetry’, p. 211.
When he [i.e. Óttar] had finished [reciting], Sighvatr said, “The poem is complex and I am not surprised that the king did not like it. We must change those stanzas that are most explicit in the poem, and then you must compose another poem about the king. He will certainly want to hear you recite the poem about the queen before you are killed, and when you have finished reciting it you must not stop but should go straight on to recite the poem you have composed about the king and continue reciting for as long as you are able”.

Just as the modern Nigerian court poet responds to his environment and adapts his poetry to suit his audience, this account suggests that skálds too were aware of their listening audience and were not afraid to revise their compositions for the sake of a favourable audience reaction.

In addition to memorising and revising their own compositions, however, it also appears that skálds were more than capable of memorising whole praise poems or drápur crafted by other poets. In Stufs þátr hinn skemmri, for example, Stúfr recites many flokkr, none of which he attributes to himself, as can be seen in the following:

458 Gade also notes that skálds could perform poetry spoken by other skálds, and I have taken the example of Steini in Heimskringla from her analysis. See: Gade, The Structure of Old Norse Dróttkvætt Poetry, p. 22. It is also interesting to note the nickname skáldaspillir ('plagiarist') usually attributed to the tenth-century Norwegian poet Eyvindr skáldaspillir. Russell Poole notes that Eyvindr’s nickname is fitting give that his poem Háleygjatal is essentially a ‘spin off’ of Þjóðólfur of Hvin’s earlier poem Inglingatal. See: Poole, R., “Myth and Ritual in the Háleygjatal of Eyvindr skáldaspillir”, in Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World, p. 154. Given the competitive nature of skaldic verse and the desire for skálds to showcase their artistic individuality, it is interesting to consider what kind of reaction subtly (or perhaps not so subtly) ‘plagiarised’
...Ok er menn gengu at sofa þá biðr konungr at Stúfr sé í því húsi sem hann sefr ok skemmti honum. [Ok svá gørir hann ok kvað fyrst flokk einn. Ok er lokit var þá mælti konungr: „Kveð þú enn.“ Ok þá lætr hann fara svá] nokkverja tíu flokka eða meirr. Konungr mælti: „Kanntu nokkut meira at kveða en flokkana, eða hverr hefir ort?“ Stúfr svarar: „Eigi kann ek drápur færi en ek hefi flokkana ort, þá sem nú kvað ek.“\

(‘[...]and when the king had got into bed, Stufr entertained him with a flokkur. When he had finished, the king asked him to recite another one, and the king lay awake for a long time while Stufr entertained him...’ then the king says: “You have recited thirty (flokkar). But why do you only recite flokks? Don’t you know any drápas?” Stufr answered, “I know no fewer drápas than flokks, and there are many of those that I haven’t recited yet’”).

In Mánþáttr skálds, the bedraggled looking poet Mání similarly recites verses for the king composed by another known skáld who is explicitly named by the saga author:


(‘The king said, “You must know some poems then, Tungli [Mání]. Sit down and recite one.” He then recited the long travel drápa that Halldor Clamour had composed about King Magnus’ uncle, King Sigurðr Jerusalem-farer’).

In Heimskringla, Steinn Skaptsson recites a stanza earlier told to him by his father. As the account says: Skapti, faðir hans, hafði ort drápu um Olaf konung ok hafði kent steini;
var svá ætlat, at hann skyldi foera kveðit konungi\(^{463}\) (‘Skapti, his father, had composed a \(\text{drápa}\) about King Ólafr and had taught it to Steinn; it was so intended that he should perform / recite it to the king’).\(^{464}\) Interestingly, like Stufr neither Máni nor Steinn claim ownership of the poems that they recite, like modern day Somalian poets whose poetic compositions: ‘become his own property, under his own name, meaning that any other poet reciting them has to acknowledge from whom he has learnt them.’\(^{465}\) Although the sagas rarely record such instances of poetic re-performance, it is clear from the sagas that skaldic praise must have been passed down orally which means that, as Stefanie Würth notes in her analysis of skaldic performance, it must have been remembered and recited by other \textit{skálds}.\(^{466}\) In a cultural milieu where \textit{skálds} strove for verbal ingenuity and individual artistic flair in their poetic compositions, it is thus interesting that they would willingly memorise and re-perform poems originally composed by other court poets. The likelihood is that, like with many modern musicians, \textit{skálds} learnt their art (including the wide range of \textit{heiti} and \textit{kenningar}) by learning others’ poems \textit{by ear}.\(^{467}\) These examples of \textit{skálds} reciting other poet’s praise not only hint towards a much wider process of poetic learning and memorisation than the sagas provide direct access to: since writing did not exist, \textit{skálds} must have learnt through the medium of sound. The sagas also suggest that, in live performance, the king and his court were judging more than just the poem’s recycled kennings and content, but the oral performance of the performer himself.

Whether a \textit{skáld} performed his own composition or someone else’s, the saga’s literary accounts make it clear that skaldic praise poetry involved a performance process that was very different from the spontaneous \textit{lausavísur} or ‘loose verses’ that we find scattered throughout the sagas. The implication is that skaldic poetry also necessitated oral rehearsal. Admittedly, there are certainly examples of verses being improvised and

\(^{463}\) Old Norse quote taken from Gade, \textit{The Structure of Old Norse Dрóttkvætt Poetry}, p. 22.
\(^{464}\) English translation taken from Gade, \textit{The Structure of Old Norse Dрóttkvætt Poetry}, p. 22.
\(^{465}\) Finnegar, ‘What is Oral Literature Anyway?’ p. 262. My italics. Whether we can trust the name attributed to a skaldic poem is, of course, another question. The fact that a certain verse is sometimes attributed to more than one poet questions just how much attention \textit{skálds} and later saga writers paid to acknowledging the ‘original’ poet, and also questions whether later saga authors deliberately changed or invented names to suit their own literary agenda.
\(^{467}\) Guðrún Nordal has raised some interesting questions with regards to the later ‘schooling’ of \textit{skálds} in the thirteenth century. She suggests that mnemonic lists such as \textit{pular} (lists of \textit{heiti}) could be memorised by \textit{skálds} and used during composition. See: Nordal, \textit{Tools of Analysis}, p. 5. Whilst it is possible that \textit{for skálds} composing in a wholly-oral environment such ‘rote learning’ may have occurred, it also seems likely that poems (and, by extension, the art of composition) were learnt simply from hearing poetry performance, much like we learn a song on the radio or nursery rhyme.
composed on the spot in Scandinavian courts as part of a complex social game and challenge culture, as in Einars þáttir Skúlasonar, where the poet Einarr is challenged to compose a poem in a limited amount of time. The king says: „Nú munum vit eigi sáttir nema þú yrkir nú vísu áðr ek drekka af kerinu”\(^{468}\) (“Now we won’t be reconciled unless you compose a verse before I finish drinking this goblet”).\(^{469}\) In Sneglu-Halla þátttr, the sharp-tongued poet Halli is put to a similar test when: [...] konungr tók disk einn af borði sínu, ok var ásteikðr gríss, ok bað Tútu dverg foera Halla, — „Ok bið hann yrkja visu, ef hann vill halda lifinu, ok hafa kveðit, áðr þú kemr á mitt golf”\(^{470}\) (“The king took a dish containing a roasted piglet from his table and ordered the dwarf Tuta to take it to Halli “and tell him that if he wants to preserve his life to compose a verse and deliver it before you reach him, and do not tell him this until you get to the middle of the floor”).\(^{471}\) Ultimately, however, it seems that the long or formal praise poem belonged to a tradition in which skálds spent time carefully crafting and memorising their poems, and not least how they would work and hold attention in performance. Following this, skálds would perform their pre-composed praise as live sound and action before the critical eyes and ears of the Norwegian court. As a result, the king would respond to the skáld’s performance and then offer judgement in the form of a generous reward or, for those unlucky skálds who failed, a missing head or ruined reputation.

For a praise poem to be rewarded, memorised and re-performed by other skálds, we should not forget that it needed to engage the (presumably often inebriated) audience, grip their attention and inspire re-telling: in short, it needed to be memorable. This could take place on at least two levels. The verbal text or content of praise poetry itself was usually highly formulaic, extremely hyperbolic and somewhat predictable. Essentially, all praise poetry essentially said the same thing: that is, that skálds needed to distinguish themselves by using elaborate kennings and sophisticated metrics. Whilst this might have been appreciated by skaldic experts, it is not clear how accessible a series of cryptic kennings were for an average listening audience. On the other hand, the acoustic soundscape created by alliteration, rhythm, rhyme and extra-lexical elements (such as the skáld’s pitch, pace and

\(^{471}\) The Tale of Sarcastic Halli (trans. Clark, p. 346).
tone) would have been immediately audible to anyone within earshot of the speaking skáld, even if the poem’s content itself was obscure.

In Sneglu-Halla þátttr, for example, content is seen as being completely irrelevant when the sharp-tongued skáld Halli recites a nonsense poem to the King of England (see Chapter 2.5) suggesting that it was the sound of the prestigious metre dróttkvætt, the musicality and aural beauty of the verse that could be appreciated just as much as kennings and convoluted syntax. In fact, Kari Ellen Gade notes how kings and other audiences often responded to skaldic performance with the comments such as vel kveðit (‘well-spoken / recited’), or that they felt that the skáld had managed to flytja framma skóruna (‘to deliver in a commendable manner’), thereby remarking on the skáld’s delivery of a poem rather than its composition or meaning.472 In Porleifs þátttr jarlsskálados the saga author even distinguishes between poetic composition and oral delivery when discussing the audience’s reaction to Porleifr’s performance: Konungr lofaði mjök kvæðit ok allir þeir er heyruðu ok sogðu bæði vel kveðit og skóruna fram flutt.473 (‘The king was very complimentary about the poem, and everyone who heard it said it was both well composed and excellently performed’).474 In a loud, lively mead hall full of feasting warriors, it is thus questionable whether the verbal text (or literal ‘words’ of a poem) was the most important feature of skaldic praise poetry: instead, perhaps the skaldic spotlight was focused on the performer himself. This therefore begs the question: what was the function of the court poet other than simply being a medium or mouthpiece to channel royal praise? Furthermore, how did he make these poems work as live sound and action in a public place, and with what effect?

### 3.6. The Skaldic Space

As has been argued throughout this thesis, skaldic poetry existed as live acoustic sound and space rather than silent symbols on a printed page. More importantly, as was noted in Chapters 2.1-2.4 and 2.7, when a skáld articulated skaldic poetry he engaged a specific poetic register that immediately marked out his utterance out as separate from ordinary speech. For both a modern and medieval audience, the mere sound of dróttkvætt with its pounding rhythm, alliterating rhymes and musical metrics would have been enough to

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distinguish it as audibly different from everyday speech. At the beginning of a skáld’s poetic recitation, there would thus be a ‘shift’ or change in register signalling the start of performance, a shift that also required the skaldic audience to cognitively code-switch: after all, as John Miles Foley notes, ‘registers are more highly-coded than everyday language.’

In terms of performance, once a skáld began his utterance of heightened praise and engaged the poetic (or skaldic) register, a separate space would thus have been created. Just like Kate Tempest’s performance of Brand New Ancients (see Chapters 2.1-2.2.) or Benjamin Bagby’s recitation of Beowulf (see Chapters 1.10 and 2.4), where people stand back to watch and give the performer ‘space’, the sound of skaldic verse being uttered would also form a performance arena in which the skáld and his audience could ‘transact their business.’ As such, it can be argued that the performance of skaldic poetry was closely tied up with physical performance space that, like the performance context, would naturally impact upon the audience’s understanding of the poem’s function and effect.

Of course, poetry venues were somewhat less glamorous in the Viking Age than the physical performance spaces used in many modern poetry recitals. The smoky, dimly-lit hall of a Norwegian court would have had an important effect on the audience and atmosphere during a skáld’s performance. It is clear from the literary accounts of the sagas that for the early Scandinavian warrior culture and social elite, a good deal of time was spent in the mead hall which was as an important venue for the king and men of influence to conduct their political affairs. These were clearly quite prestigious surroundings. In Þorleifs þáttr jarlsskálds, for example, we read how: Þat var atfangskveld jóla í þann tíma er jarl var kominn í sæti ok mart stórmenni er jarl hafði at sér boðit til jólaveizlunnar (‘It was the evening before the midwinter festival, and the earl had just taken his seat along with the many important people that he had invited to his feast’).

In Vatnsdæla saga, meanwhile, the narrator tells us how: Jarl bjó veizlu, en þorsteinn sótti til með Raumdoela ok morgu stórmenni, en veizlan var prýdd góðum tilföngum; gekk hon út með inni mestu soemð ok stórum fégjǫfum, ok skiðusk þeir jarl ok Ketill með inni mestu vináttu (‘The earl prepared a feast, and Thorstein attended with the Romsdal people and many men of distinction and

475 Foley, How to Read an Oral Poem, p. 116.
the feast was splendid with its fine fare. It drew to a close with the greatest honour and with lavish gifts, and Ketil and the earl parted on the friendliest of terms’).

Many such events in pre-Christian times had an additional semi-religious, ritual event element. *Gísla saga Surssonar* contains an account of the celebration known as *vetrnætr* (‘Winter Nights’), as the saga author tells us how: *þat var þá margra manna siðir at fagna vetri i þann tima ok hafa þá veizlur ok vetrnáttablot* (‘In those days, it was the general custom to celebrate the coming of winter by holding feasts and a Winter Nights' sacrifice’). Another similar account is given in *Víga-Glúms saga*, which states that: *þar var veizla búin at vetrnóttum ok gört disablót, ok allir skulu þessa minning gera* (‘A feast was held during the Winter Nights, and sacrifice made to the disir, and everyone had to take part in this observance’). Of course, with evening entertainment also came drinking, and the sagas do not spare on their descriptions of such ale-quaffing as is demonstrated in *Egils saga*, where the saga author captures the atmosphere of the hall in wonderful detail:

> *Egill fann þá, at honum myndi eigi svá búit eira; stóð hann þá upp ok gekk um golf þvert, þangat Ármóðr sat; hann tók hónum í axlir honum ok kneikði hann upp at stofum. Síðan þeysti Egill upp ór sér spýju mikla, ok gaus í andlit Ármóði, í augun ok nasarnar ok i munninn; ran svá ofan bringuna.*

(‘Egill told his companions they should not drink any more, and he drank theirs for them too when there was no avoiding it. Egill started to feel that he would not be able to go on like this. He stood up and waked across the floor to where Armod was sitting, seized him by the shoulders and thrust him up against a wall-post. Then Egill spewed a torrent of vomit that gushed all over Armod’s face, filling his eyes and nostrils and mouth’).
Evening feasting and loose tongues would have offered an excellent opportunity for *skálds* to showcase their skills and provide entertainment. The wedding feast in *Laxdæla saga*, where the prestigious poet Úlfr Uggason has a cameo role and is rewarded for his composition of a *drápa*, provides an apt example of a typical skaldic performance space, complete with fire and guests:

[...] þat boð var allfjölmennt, því at þá var algort eldhúsit. Þar var at boði Úlfr Uggason ok hafði ort kvæði um Ólaf Høskulðsson ok um sogur þær, er skrifaðar váru á eldhúsinu, ok foerði hann þar at boðinu. Þetta kvæði er kallat Húsdrápa ok er vel ort. Óláfr launadí vel kvæðit. Hann gaf ok stórgjafar ðillu stórmenni, er hann hafði heim sótt. Þótti Óláfr vaxit hafa af þessi veizlu.487

('A great number of people attended the feast as the fire-hall was fully built by that time. Among the guests was a poet, Úlfr Uggason, who had composed a poem about Olaf Høskulðsson and the tales carved on the wood of the fire-hall which he recited at the feast. It is called House *Drápa* and is a fine piece of verse. Olaf rewarded him well for the poem, and gave all the important people who attended the feast fine gifts, gaining considerable respect as a result.')488

The oft-quoted scene involving the recitation of the poetry and storytelling that took place during the Reykhólar wedding (1119) supports this suggestion that verbal art was a popular part of social events taking place in the space of the hall.489 In terms of skaldic praise poetry, it seems likely that the *skáld* would have débuted his composition in front of his patron himself. It thus seems reasonable to argue that the majority of courtly *drápur* were also recited during the evening in the smoky, heady atmosphere of the Viking Age hall full of rowdy males, eating and drinking. The physical space of the *skáld*’s performance would thus have impacted on how he used his voice, body and surrounding environment to make himself seen and heard. The communal mood in the shared space of the hall would have

487 *Laxdæla saga* (ed. Einar Öl. Sveinsson, p. 80)
489 For further discussion regarding the 1119 Reykhólar wedding and the oral context surrounding it, see: Harris, ‘Performance, Textualisation and Textuality of “Elegy” in Old Norse’, pp. 89-91.
also ultimately affected how the audience understood and experienced the skáld’s live performance. It should also be noted that the poems would have been composed with all of these elements in mind, just like Shakespeare’s plays were written specifically for the space of the Globe Theatre.

3.7. Under the Spotlight: Presenting the Skáld Himself

Despite the near stereotypical, clichéd image of the skáld depicted in saga narratives, in reality these figures were not two-dimensional: like any performer the skáld would have had his own personality, his own unique appearance and a professional reputation to precede him. Indeed, it seems that the skálds who enjoyed professional status at the Norwegian court, such as those listed in skáldatal (‘tally of poets’) (see Introduction above), would have been relatively well-known public figures, perhaps the celebrities of their time. In Sneglu-Halla þátttr, for example, it is said of the poet Þjóðólfr that: kallaði konungr hann hofuðskáld sitt ok virði hann mest allra skáldatal490(‘The king called him his chief poet, and honoured him above all other poets’).491 The sheer number of poets proclaiming praise under Jarl Hákon’s sway in the tenth century suggests that skálds certainly had an incredibly public, vocal role at the jarl’s court. Amongst those warriors and elite in regular attendance of poetry performances at the king’s court, certain skálds seem to have taken on a pseudo-celebrity status: like anyone attending an Ozzy Osbourne concert, the skaldic audience would thus have had a pre-conceived image or impression of the performer. Like anyone who has experienced the gruff Irish accent of a modern-day storyteller whilst sitting in a dingy Dublin pub on a dark winter evening, a skaldic audience would also remember the mood and the atmosphere, the gestures, vocal qualities and the particular quirks of the skáld from his prior performances. In addition to this the performer’s expressive equipment such as facial expressions and clothing (the so-called ‘fluid’ front) alongside his gender and physical appearance (the ‘fixed’ front, which Erving Goffman argues is used by all performers) would have been intimately connected with the performer himself.492 Just as music fans might associate garish cowboy boots with Dolly Parton, a skáld too would have his own expressive equipment and associations. Many audience members attending a court

performance by a well-known skáld would thus not enter the performance space with a neutral mind set. Instead, their expectations and prior knowledge of the poet would have undoubtedly influenced their anticipation, but also their understanding and subsequently their overall experience of the skáld’s pending performance. This would almost certainly have applied to ‘famous’ skaldic figures such as Þorbjørn hornklofi, Þjóðólfr of Hvin or Einarr skálaglamm (see below Chapter 4).

On the other hand, plenty of literary accounts depict the skáld making his first appearance in the hall as an unknown outsider. In many cases, the skáld is a stranger who turns up at court and then proceeds to demonstrate his poetic skill, as in the case of Halli in Sneglu-Halla þáttur or Egill when arriving before King Eiríkr in Egils saga. In such cases, they would have had to have worked even harder to gain audience attention. In some cases, it seems that skálds even took to disguising themselves to ensure that their identity remained concealed. This disguise could then become part of the performance, as in Þorleifs þáttur jarlsskálds:

Þorleifr býr sér nú stafkarls gervi ok bindur sér geitarskegg ok tók sér eina stóra hit ok lét koma undir stafkarls gervina kg bjó svo um at ðllum skyldi sýnast sem hann æti þann kost er hann kastaði í hitina þvi at gíman hennar var uppi við munn honum undir geitarskegginu. Síðan tekr hann hækjur tvær ok var broddr niður úr hvorri, ferr nú þar til er hann kemr á Hlaðir […] Karl gengur greiðliga inn í hóllina en er hann kemr inn stumrar hann geysimjök ok fellr fast á hækjurnar og snýr til annarra stafkarla ok sezt niður utarlega í hálminn.493

(‘Þorleifr disguised himself as a beggar. He tied on a goat's beard and took a large leather bag which he hid under his beggar's gear, so that everyone would think he ate the food which he put into the bag, as its opening was up by his mouth under the goat's beard. He also took two crutches with spiked ends, and went to Lade….It was the evening before the midwinter festival, and the earl had just taken his seat along with the many important people that he had invited to his feast. The old man went

quickly into the hall and, on entering, he stumbled badly, falling heavily onto his crutches.’)\(^{494}\)

One aspect of the poet’s image that needs to be borne in mind is the skáld’s potential supernatural associations, like the Nordic fiddle players’ alleged education by waterfall dwellers.\(^{495}\) Of course, poetry itself was directly connected with the supernatural. As a jötunn’s booty and the gift of the gods brewed from the Æsir’s spittle and a dead-man’s blood, this powerful concoction was full of otherworldly associations (see Chapter 2.7). The supernatural connection, however, did not stop there: according to the oral tradition recorded in the sagas, poetry could be learnt from the dead, as \textit{Þorleifs þáttr jarlsskálds} suggests in its account of how the struggling poet Hallbjörn sleeps on a dead poet’s grave in the hope of poetic inspiration:

\begin{quote}
Þat var eina nátt sem optar at hann liggr á hauginum ok hefir ina sömu íðn fyrir stafni ef hann gæti aukit nokkut lof um haugbúann. Síðan sofnar hann ok eptir þat sér hann at opnast haugurinn ok gengr þar út maðr mikill vexti ok vel bûnn. Hann gekk upp á hauginn at Hallbirni ok mæliti: „Par ligg [þú] Hallbjörn ok vildir þú fóst í þvi sem þér er ekki lánat, at yrkja lof um mik ek þat annaðhvárt að þér verðr lagit í þessi íþrótt ok munt þú af mér fá meira en vel flestum mǫnnum þærum ok er þat vænna at svo verði ella þarfut ekki í þessu að brjótast lengr. Skal ek nú kveða fyrir þér visu ok ef þú getr numit visuna ok kannt hana þá er þú vaknar þá munt þú verða þjóðskáld ok yrkja lof um marga hofðingja ok mun þér í þessi íþrótt mikit lagit verða”\(^{496}\)
\end{quote}

(‘One night as usual he was lying on the mound and was still trying to see if he could make his praise of the mound dweller any longer. Then he fell asleep and saw the mound opening up and a large and well-dressed man coming out of it. He went up onto the mound and said to Hallbjörn, “There you lie, Hallbjörn, and you would like

\(^{494}\)\textit{The Tale of Thorleif, the Earl’s Poet} (trans. Jesch, p. 364).
\(^{496}\) \textit{Þorleifs þáttr jarlsskálds} (ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, p. 228). It is interesting to note that the saga author differentiates between \textit{kenna} (‘to know’) and \textit{nema} (‘to seize, take’), the latter of which has connotations of something physical. It could be argued that here, poetry is not only taught but it is handed over like a concrete physical object. See Chapter 2.7. for further discussion.
to struggle with something not in your power, namely to compose in praise of me. And either you will become expert in this art, and you can get this from me more than most others, and it is likely that this will happen, or else there will be no point in your struggling with this any longer. I will now recite you a verse and if you can learn it and remember it when you wake up, then you will become a great poet and will compose the praise of many chieftains, and you will be a great expert in this art.”)

In other narratives, poetic inspiration comes from other obviously liminal spaces such as caves, as in one account contained in Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar which tells how: 

\[\text{þar átti Hallmundr helli stóran ok dóttur gilda vexti ok skórlíga. Þau gerðu vel við Grettí, ok groeddí hon þá báða. Þar dvalði Grettí længi um sumarit. Hann kvað flokk um Hallmund\}^{498}\]

(‘Hallmundr lived in a big cave there with his daughter, who was stout and very imposing. They treated Grettí well and she nursed their wounds. Grettí spent much of the summer there. He composed a lay about Hallmundr’). Elsewhere in Grettis saga, we read how: 

\[\text{þar dvalði Grímr margar nætr í hellinum ok nam kviðuna}\]^{500}  (‘Grímr stayed in the cave for many nights and learned the poem’).

In other cases, poetry was said to come as the result of a shamanistic, trance-like state as in Eiríks saga rauða, where the pagan Þorhallr is found on the side of a cliff composing poetry for Þórr: 

\[\text{hann lá þar ok horfði í lopt upp ok gæði bæði munni ok nœsum ok þulði nœkkut}\]^{502}  (‘He was staring skywards, with his mouth, nostrils and eyes wide open, and mumbling something’).

As with the Nordic fiddle players, one can expect that these accounts were told by the skálds themselves, who knew the effect this would have on his image and reputation. For many people at court it seems that the skáld was an outsider, a stranger on the margins with potentially supernatural associations. Even those skálds who were well-known public figures at court were still to some extent social others: with the

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497 The Tale of Thorleif, the Earl’s Poet (trans. J. Jesch, p. 389).
499 The Saga of Grettir the Strong (trans. B. Scudder, p. 139).
500 Note the use of \textit{nema} (here in the preterite form \textit{nam}) which means ‘to seize’ or ‘to take’ the poem, possibly suggesting the idea of poetry as an object. Grettis saga (ed. Guðni Jónsson, p. 205).
prestige of a professional court poet who composed and spoke in the cryptic, rhythmic words of Óðinn, it is possible that skálds would have been elevated above their audience with an almost god-like or semi-supernatural status, especially in pre-Christian times.

In short, whether well-known or a complete stranger, the skáld would have been a potentially powerful figure whose function went beyond simply that of royal praise. By stepping into the role of ‘poet’ and speaking the words of the gods, the skáld could have created some sort of sacred space and invoked what Victor Turner calls liminality.504 Essentially, during his performance the skáld was no longer just a poet, a skilled performer or mouthpiece of the king. He became a kind of shaman, taking his audience on a journey into the world of the gods, serving as a bridge between the supernatural realm and the audience’s own reality, not least in the sense that worldly events were described with mythological reference and symbolism.505

As noted above (see Chapter 1.8), Terry Gunnell has recently argued that skálds might have even referred to the hall space where they performed as a microcosm of the Norse cosmos. In other cases, such as in performances of Eiríksmál or Hákonarmál, the hall might have been temporarily transformed into Valhöll and the audience into the einherjar for the duration of the performance, just as performers of Lokasenna, Vafþrúðnismál and Grímnismál would have temporarily transformed the hall into the halls of Ægir, Vafþrúðnir and Geirrøðr.506 With the power to transform both the audience’s physical surroundings and the audience themselves into an otherworldly players, it could be argued that the skáld’s recitation would have been seen as bringing about a collective audience experience. By calling upon the gods, changing the dynamic of the room and invoking a state of semi-sacred liminality, one could argue that there was an element of both ritual and play in the skáld’s formal praise as he used his skills as a performer to not only transform, but temporarily transport his audience and their surroundings into another world entirely. Such as aspect might have been particularly relevant in pre-Christian times and, as such, this too would have impacted on future audience expectations of skaldic performances.

Of course, there are other elements that we must consider when examining the skáld and his performance. As noted above, the performance arena was a lively and

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504 Turner. Betwixt and Between.
505 I would like to thank Terry Gunnell for his help in suggesting the idea of a ‘skaldic shaman’.
competitive forum for court skálds and once they had fought their way to the top of poetic prestige, presumably they wanted to stay there. In *Sneglu-Halla þáttir*, for example, the king informs Halli that he has a lot to live up to if he wishes to compose praise: „Þat mun þá sumra manna mál, at þú takisk mikit í fang fyrsta sinni, slik skáld sem of mik hafa ort.“

(The king later finds fun in deliberately setting Halli and Þjóðólfur, the king’s chief poet, against one another in a battle of skálds, not unlike modern rap battles or slam contests. The saga describes how Halli says: „Kveða mun þjóðólfur þá skulu Sóptrugvisur, er hann orti út á Íslandi“, segir Halli, „ok er pat vel, at Þjóðólfur leitaði á mik eða afviriði fyrir mér, því at upp eru svá komnir í mér bitar ok jaxlar, at ek kann vel at svara honum jöfnun orðum.“

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The king grinned at that and thought it fun to set them against each other’.

Similar opposition is apparent in *Mána-þáttir skálds*, where the poet Máni turns up at court and is appalled by the recently arrived leikarar (‘players’) in whose antics, compared to the sophistication of the skaldic art, he sees no artistry at all. Máni both shows his contempt and showcases his own talent by composing a witty verse in which he mocks the leikari’s behaviour:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Slægr fer gaur með giðju,} \\
\text{ginn er hér komið inni,} \\
\text{meiðr hefir skjalðar skóða} \\
\text{skripalát, og pipu.} \\
\text{Rekkr lætr rauða bikkju} \\
\text{rekið skvaldr, fyrir aldir,} \\
\text{skulut hlýða því þjóðir,} \\
\text{það er skaup, yfir staf hlaupa.}
\end{align*}
\]

(‘A cunning rogue with fiddle and fife, deceit has entered this place, the tree of the shield stroker [ sword] strikes an antic tone. A man makes a red bitch jump over a stick for folk — stop the squalling — people hear humour with a cutting edge.’)\textsuperscript{512}

Equally, if a skáld’s skills were not up to standard then he could be overlooked almost immediately, as occurs in \textit{Einars þáttur Skúlasonar} where the king asks: “\textit{Hvat er nú skálda með oss?” segir konungr. Þar var Snorri Bárðarson. Honum var ekki auðfynt, ok tók hann ekki svá skjótt til sem konungr vildi}”\textsuperscript{513} (“Which of our poets is with us now?” Snorri Bardarson was there. He had trouble finding the right words and did not compose fast enough to please the king’).\textsuperscript{514} There is therefore little question that the skáld had to be a skilled performer as well as composer if he wanted to engage and maintain the audience’s attention.

Whilst his status and possible supernatural associations might command respect and attention from his audience, a skáld could not rely on these features alone. Instead, like any performer, a skáld would need to use extra-lexical or non-verbal skills such as changing his vocal tone, his pitch, his pace and intonation in addition toaltering his posture, using facial expression and gesture to create a convincing, engaging and ultimately memorable performance. The traditional \textit{upphaf} or ‘call to attention’ that skálds often used at the start of their recitation may have been one way of attracting the eyes and ears of the audiences, whilst metacommunicatively signalling the start of his performance.\textsuperscript{515} In \textit{Arnors þáttur jarlsskálds}, for example, when the poet starts by calling for hearing:

\textit{Magnús hlýddu til mättigs óðar.}

\textsuperscript{512}The Tale of Mani the Poet (trans. Maxwell, p. 340).
\textsuperscript{513}Morkinskinna II.(ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Pórður Ingi Guðjónsson, p. 224).
\textsuperscript{514}Einar Skúlason’s Tale (trans. S. Brumfit, p. 338).
\textsuperscript{515}The term metacommunication is defined by Schechner as a signal that give the audience (or ‘receiver’) a message telling them how to interpret the communication that the performer is giving. Schechner provides the example of a dog that playfully nips and snarls: the receiver knows that the dog is playing (as opposed to being genuinely aggressive) as the dog metacommunicatively signals, ‘I could bite you, but I choose not to, so I love you. I am playing.’ (Schechner, Performance Studies, p. 102. In skaldic performance (like any self-conscious artistic performance), the skáld’s call to attention would arguably serve as a metacommunicative signal that sends the audience a specific message, which communicates: ‘I am a poet, and I am starting my performance. You need to listen now and interpret my behaviour according to the rules of poetic performance, not ordinary everyday behaviour’.
Mangi veit eg fremra annan.
Yppa råðumk yðru kappi,
Jóta gramr, i kvæði fljótu.
Haukr rétt eru, Hǫrða dróttinn.
Hverr gramr er þér stóru verri.
Meiri verði þinn en þeira
þrifnuðr allr uns himinn rifnar.\textsuperscript{516}

(‘Magnus, hear my potent poem, / I know no one surpassing you. / Prince of Jutes, I am to praise your prowess / in this flowing poem. / Lord of Hordaland, you’re heroic. / Other leaders fall short of you. / May all your success surpass theirs / until the heavens are sundered.’\textsuperscript{517})

Egill does the same in the opening verse to his shield poem:

\begin{verse}
Heyri fúrs á forsas
fallhadds vinar stalla
hyggi, þegn, til þagnar
þinn lýðr, konungs, mina;
opt skal arnar kjapta
orð góð of tróð Hǫrða,
hræfnstýrandi hroera
hregna, mín of fregnask.\textsuperscript{518}
\end{verse}

(‘Hear, king’s subject, / my fountain of praise / from long-haired Óðinn, / the guardian of sacrificial fire: / may men pledge silence. / My words of praise, / my seed sown / from the eagle’s mouth [> poetry] / shall often be heard in Hordaland, / O guider of the wave-cliff’s raven.’\textsuperscript{519})

\textsuperscript{516} Morkinskinna II (ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, pp. 143–4).
\textsuperscript{518} Egils saga (ed. Nordal, p. 275-276).
\textsuperscript{519} Egils saga (trans. Scudder, p. 165).
Another example of a skáld performing a call to attention is in a strophe by Einarr skálaglamm, quoted in Skáldskaparmál:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Hugstóran bið ek heyra}
\hspace{2em}—heyr, jarl, Kvasis dreýra —
\textit{foldar vorð á fyrða}
\textit{fjarðleggjar brim dreggjar.}^{520}
\end{quote}

(‘Land’s magnanimous guardian I bid hear — hear, earl, Kvasir’s blood — fjord-bone’s [> stone’s] men’s [> dwarves’] yeast-surf [> mead].’)^{521}

In Skáldskaparmál Glúmr Geirson’s audience-grabbing imperative command hlýði (‘listen’) makes his intentions quite clear:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Hlýði, hapta beiðs}
\textit{hefk mildinga gildi.}
\textit{því biðjum vér þognar}
\textit{þegna tjón at fregnum.}^{522}
\end{quote}

(‘Listen! I begin the feast [> the mead, a poem] of the gods’ ruler [>Óðinn] of princes.
We crave silence, for we have heard of the loss of men.’)^{523}

For a skáld to make himself heard above the chatter and noise of the mead-hall would have presumably been a feat in itself. In Egils saga, for example, it is clear that Egill has to raise his volume to attract attention: \textit{þá gækk Egill fyrir hann ok hóf upp kvæðit ok kvæð hátt ok fekk þegar hljóð}^{524} (‘When the king had finished speaking, Egil went before him and delivered his poem, reciting it in a loud voice, and everyone fell silent at once.’)^{525}

^{520}\textit{Skáldskaparmál} (ed. Faulkes, p. 12).
^{525}\textit{Egil’s saga} (trans. Scudder, p. 120).
In terms of performance technique, it is important to stress once again that the *skáld* was not an actor in the modern sense: he was not impersonating a fictional character on a proscenium arch stage nor consciously pretending to be someone else. As Julia Novak points out, theatre often (although not always) has an imaginary fourth wall whereas live poetry, like stand-up comedy or Brechtian theatre, acknowledges its audiences (as the skaldic ‘call to attention’ above demonstrates).\[^{526}\] Whilst skaldic verse is heightened, highly artificial art in contrast to everyday speech, it seems that the *skáld* essentially projected a personality or persona of himself: he did not represent a fictional character. Nevertheless, as noted above, by speaking in the language of the gods, constructing liminal zones and possibly taking on a shaman-like role, it seems that there would always have been an element of play or make belief to the *skáld*’s performance. Several scholars have observed that modern-day storytellers often inhabit the characters that they narrate by using a variety of physical and vocal techniques. Zimmerman, for example, argues that there are: ‘ways of sitting or standing, movements of hand, head nods to reinforce words, facial expression, eye contact to involve a listener into the story – these are important components of storytelling, capable of acting as signs and producing effects which overlap with, or counterpoint, verbal communication.’\[^{527}\] Röhrich argues similarly that: ‘narrators are therefore often literally involved with “body and soul”; they want to impart themselves to the audience. Like ingenious actors, they transform themselves into the characters they play.’\[^{528}\]

Even if a *skáld* did not ‘speak’ directly with the voice of a god or supernatural being (as some dialogic and monologic eddic poems allowed), it seems reasonable to suggest that he could have made use of other extra-lexical performance skills, such as facial expression, body language and gesture, to bring the characters in his poem ‘to life’ and thereby transport their audience to another world. In short, it appears that beyond the superficial function of praise, *skálds* and their poetry played a much more important, symbolically-coded performative role in the court of pagan rulers and Norwegian kings than has been previously thought. Clearly the contest and competitive element behind their performance would have presumably forced them to find new and interesting ways beyond mere words to engage — and maintain — their audience’s attention. In addition, it seems clear that

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skálðs’ potentially powerful, supernatural associations suggest that the poems composed and performed in pagan times would have harnessed an additional semi-ritualistic element that would have added strength to the liminality that they induced. It now seems fitting to move on to a more detailed analysis of several praise poems composed and performed by pre-Christian skálðs, bearing both the competitive and semi-ritualistic element of the skaldic art in mind.
4.1. Poetry in Action: the Performance of Pre-Christian Skaldic Court Poems

As noted above in Chapter 1.7-1.9, aside from Terry Gunnell whose research has consistently pushed for a performance-based analysis of skaldic and eddic verse, few scholars have examined ninth- and tenth-century praise poetry as performance poetry. As argued above (see Chapter 3), all performance can be placed on a spectrum somewhere between ritual and play. Considering that the ninth- and tenth-century mythologically-rich skaldic praise poems were most likely composed in pre-Christian or ‘pagan’ times, it seems reasonable to suggest that these poems at least incorporated some sort of semi-religious element during live performance. In his forthcoming article about Eiríksmál and Hákonarmál, Terry Gunnell explores the potentially religious or ritual function that experiencing these poetic ‘texts’ as live sound, space and action might have had upon an audience. By temporarily transforming the performance space of the hall into a religious or semi-sacred space, at the same time as transforming the audience into supernatural players, Gunnell demonstrates that these poems went beyond simply oral recitation: they created an important ritual experience for those present. This combination of ritual and play, of constructing ‘make belief’ worlds for the purpose of religious expression or ritual custom (see Chapter 3), would have made for a lively and dynamic experience for both the skáld and his audience. The following analysis seeks to take a similar approach and not only explore how certain pre-Christian skaldic praise poems might have worked as live performance, but question what function they served and what effects they might have had upon their live, listening audience.

The ninth- and tenth-century skaldic praise poems in question (see below) have already been subject to extensive editing, research and analysis. The poems Ragnarsdrápa, Haustlöng and Húsdrápa, for example, which are often referred to by scholars as ‘shield poems’, have been subject to interdisciplinary studies that incorporate fields such as archaeology, art history and speech-act theory into their analyses. Scholars have offered

529 Gunnell, ‘The Uses of Performance Studies for the Study of Old Norse Religion.’
everything from linguistic to structuralist readings of these courtly praise poems; they have explored literary motifs that these poems make use of such as Hel and hand-tools; they have generated algebraic-looking systems for syntax and syllable counting; and argued endlessly over kenning constructions and dating.531

The ‘pagan’ poems have also been mined for information regarding pre-Christian myth, religion and ritual practice in early Scandinavia. Studies into poems such as Ynglingatal, Háleygjatal, Eiríksmál and Hákonarmál have, for example, questioned ruler-ship ideology and its connection with religious belief (such as sacral kingship or the image of the afterlife for rulers), whereas other poems such as pórsdrápa and Vellekla have been studied for their potential role in a new tenth-century move towards court propaganda and politicised myth.532 Although these latter more religion- and ruler-focused studies are useful for their attempt to engage with the potentially lost context of myth, ritual and belief in ‘pagan’ Scandinavia, they rarely consider how the poems themselves might have served a ritual function in live performance. What is more, these studies often forget that how these poems were broadcast (that is as live performances) and the frames the performers and their audiences might have put around the performances in question which might have been one of the skáld’s main concerns: in other words, metrics and metaphors alone might not have been enough to create a show-stopping, mood-changing experience. In short, as has been stressed above, we need to give some consideration to their original form as a genre that existed in sound and vision, and the way they functioned in performance.

The poems that I have chosen to analyse below (see Chapters 4.2 and 4.3) reflect the diversity of poems and poetic styles being performed at the early Scandinavian court, and provide us with the opportunity to explore the different kinds of experiences a skaldic performer could have created for his live, physically present audience. The shield poems

531 Compare, for example, Margaret Clunies Ross’ structuralist reading of Eilífr Goðrúnarson’s pórsdrápa with Roberta Frank’s analysis of hand-tool imagery and Chris Abrams’ exploration of Hel and the afterlife as a literary topos in the same poem. See: Clunies Ross, ‘An Interpretation of the Myth of Þórr’s Encounter’, pp. 370-81; Frank, ‘Hand Tools and Power in Eilífr’s pórsdrápa’, and Abram, ‘Representations of the Pagan Afterlife in Medieval Scandinavian Literature’. For analysis of kenning constructions and metrics see: Gade, The Structure of Old Norse Dróttkvætt Poetry, pp. 2-24; and Frank, Old Norse Court Poetry.

532 See, for example: Poole, ‘Myth and Ritual in the Háleygjatal of Eyvindr skáldaspillir’, pp. 53-176. In this article, Poole investigates the various pre-Christian mythological and ritual traditions apparently preserved in the poem Háleygjatal, and concludes that ‘the poem commands our interest as providing a form of access to representations of social practices in a world where the ancestral religion still held sway’, p. 176. In terms of ‘political propaganda’, see: Ström, ‘Poetry as an Instrument of Propaganda’, pp. 440-58.
(Chapter 4.2), for example, offer an interesting performance dynamic as they bring into play the idea of a skáld engaging with a physical object (a shield), whether real or imagined. The praise poem Hrafnsmál (see Chapter 4.3) allows us to consider what sort of function and effect a semi-dramatic praise poem may have had on its listening audience, whereas the two poems Glýmdrápa and Ynglingatal (see Chapter 4.3) offer a completely different performance dynamic altogether given their concern with creating musical and vibrant acoustic soundscapes. Although there are several other skaldic poems that could be explored from a Performance Studies perspective, such as Egill Skallagrímsson’s Sonatorrek or Glúmr Geirsson’s Gráfeldardrápa, given the time and length constraints of this thesis it is not possible to offer a thorough analysis of the entire extant corpus of pre-Christian skaldic verse. As such, I hope that the present selection of skaldic poems serves to illustrate the breadth and variety of performance methods, modes and audience experiences that were active in ninth- and tenth-century Norway and Iceland, and prompts other scholars to consider the remaining skaldic poems from a Performance Studies perspective.

4.2. The Skáld as Storyteller: Shield Poetry

As noted above, shield poetry is the name given by modern scholars to the three pre-Christian skaldic poems Ragnarsdrápa (Bragi Boddason, allegedly late ninth-century), Haustlǫng (Þjóðólfr of Hvin, allegedly late-ninth century to early-tenth century) and Húsdrápa (Úlfr Uggason, allegedly late-tenth century) which were apparently composed for oral performance in honour of the skálds’ individual patrons during the ninth- and tenth-centuries. These poems are unusual in the skaldic corpus because, unlike the majority of courtly verses that we have preserved today, in shield poetry the skáld did not praise his patron directly. Instead, the skáld conveyed his praise through a form of verbal ekphrasis by describing the images on a painted shield given to him by his patron.534 In return for the

533 It is important to note that Húsdrápa is thought to describe a tapestry, and not a shield; but given its ekphrastic nature scholars tend to group Húsdrápa with other shield poems. I am also aware that dating skaldic poetry is a difficult if not impossible task. Many scholars have spent time discussing the dating of these shield poems (and indeed all skaldic poems in general), in addition to discussing the order of strophes and whether we should include or exclude certain strophes from certain poems. As such, I will not go into depth here regarding the problems and possible arguments for the intricacies of skaldic dating and authorship, but instead refer the reader to the discussion and dating system contained in: ‘3.2. Dating of Poetry and Principles of Normalisation’, in Poetry From the Kings’ Sagas I: From Mythical Times to c. 1035, ed. D. Whaley, xliv-li.

534 Ekphrasis refers to the medium of describing one form of art (such as visual art i.e. a painting) with another form of art (i.e. poetry, literature). By composing poetry about visual art, the skálds mentioned above were thus
shield, the silver-tongued skáld would sculpt his own work of art by recasting the mythic-heroic scenes on the painted object into poetic sound, space and musical metrics before polishing it with the sleek veneer of praise.\textsuperscript{535}

Although all that remains of these incomplete picture poems today are a series of fragmentary strophes scattered throughout the various manuscript versions of \textit{Snorra Edda}, the extant verbal texts of these poems make it explicitly clear that they were composed with the intention of them being performed in front of a live, physically-present audience. According to the prose given in \textit{Snorra Edda}, the poem \textit{Ragnarsdrápa} was supposedly composed by the ninth-century Norwegian skáld Bragi Boddason \textit{inn gamli}. Scholars have traditionally attributed over twenty strophes to the poem \textit{Ragnarsdrápa} but, as Snorri only explicitly attributes the strophes about Jórmunrekkr (strophen 3-8) and the strophes about Hildr (strophen 9-2) to Bragi in \textit{Skáldsnaparmál}, the editors of the Skaldic Poetry Project regard the remaining strophes preserved in \textit{Skáldsnaparmál} (such as the six strophes relating to Þórr’s fishing trip) and \textit{Gylfaginning} (such as the strophe about Gefjon) as separate to \textit{Ragnarsdrápa}.\textsuperscript{536}

It seems that the ninth-century poet Bragi was well respected in the thirteenth-century literary tradition: not only is he listed as the earliest skáld whose work has survived in the medieval tally of poets \textit{Skáldatal}, in the medieval treatise on poetry \textit{Skáldskaparmál} it appears that Bragi had taken on an almost mythical status as he is euhemerised as a god, conducting \textit{ekphrasis}. For further analysis and discussion of \textit{ekphrasis} in relation to skaldic poetry, see; Fuglesang, ‘Ekphrasis and Surviving Imagery in Viking Scandinavia’, 193-224.\textsuperscript{535} Given that no archaeological evidence remains of such elaborate shields from Viking Age Scandinavia, however, it is impossible to know whether the shield was visible to both the skáld and his audience during the live performance, or whether it was a purely literary phenomenon in which the shield was not actually present but simply evoked by the skáld’s descriptions. Nevertheless, evidence such as the Gotland picture stones, the guldgubber, fine jewellery and belt buckles, the Öseberg wagon, rune stones and later stave churches suggest that early Scandinavians belonged to a highly artistic culture. It therefore does not seem unreasonable to imagine the existence of painted shields in ninth- and tenth-century Norway. For more information, see: Clunies Ross, M., ‘Stylistic and Generic Identifiers of the Old Norse Skaldic Ekphrasis’, \textit{Viking and Medieval Scandinavia} 3.1 (2007), 159-92; Hines, ‘“Ekphrasis as Speech-Act”’, pp. 225-244; and Fuglesang, ‘Ekphrasis and Surviving Imagery in Viking Scandinavia’, pp. 193-224. For additional studies into the three shield poems, see; Stavnem, R., ‘The Kennings in \textit{Ragnarsdrápa}, \textit{Medieval Scandinavia} 14 (2004), 161-84; Clark, T., ‘Semantic Focus and the Rhetoric of Situation: Close Reading of the Shield Kennings in \textit{Ragnarsdrápa} and \textit{Haustlǫng},’ in \textit{Sagas and the Norwegian Experience: 10th International Saga Conference, Trondheim 3-9 August 1997} (Trondheim, 1997); North, R., ‘Image and Ascendancy in Úlfur Uggaðson’s “Húsdrápa”’, in \textit{Text, Image, Interpretation: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature and its Insular Context in Honour of Eamonn Ó Carragháin}, ed. J. Robert and A. Minnis (Turnhout: 2007), pp. 369-404; North, R., \textit{The ‘Haustlǫng of Pjóðölf of Hvinir, edited with Introduction, Translation, Commentary and Glossary} (London, 1997); and Gade, K. E., ‘The \textit{Haustlǫng of Pjóðölf of Hvinir}, \textit{Journal of English and Germanic Philology} 98 (3) (1999), 407-9.\textsuperscript{58} See: ‘Bragi inn gamli Boddason’, ed. M. Clunies Ross in \textit{Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages}, https://www.abdn.ac.uk/skaldic/db.php?id=31&if=default&table=skalds&val=&view= (viewed 25 November, 2014).
which may lend support to what has been said earlier about the skáld as a semi-religious figure or ‘shaman’ (see Chapter 3.7).\textsuperscript{537} Whilst analysing Bragi as a historical figure is thus often problematic, Snorri Sturluson nevertheless explicitly names Bragi as the composer of the shield poem \textit{Ragnarsdrápa}, which he claims was composed in honour of the legendary Ragnarr Íðrbrók. Here, the skáld begins his performance with a ‘call to attention’ as noted above (Chapters 3.6-3.6). This underlines that in a world without pen and ink, Bragi intended his poem to be performed and received as sound poetry. Bragi starts by asking someone named Hrafnketill, presumably his patron, for a hearing (\textit{heyra}) directly:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Vilið, Hrafnketill, heyra
hvé hreingróit steini
Þrúðar skalk ok þengil
Þjófs ilja blað leyfa?}\textsuperscript{538}
\end{quote}

(‘Will you, Hrafnketill, hear how I shall praise the leaf of the footsoles of the thief of Þrúðr [> goddess ] > Hrugnir], bright-planted with colour, and the prince?’)\textsuperscript{539}

A similar approach (or ‘call to attention’) is taken in \textit{Húsdrápa}, a poem that both \textit{Snorra Edda} and \textit{Laxdæla saga} attribute to the late-tenth century poet Úlfr Uggason which describes the mythological images depicted on a tapestry hanging in the hall of the Icelandic chieftain Ólafr pái.\textsuperscript{540} The poem is not strictly a ‘shield poem’ as it does not describe a painted shield but, as it describes mythological images on a material object, scholars tend to group \textit{Húsdrápa} with the other shield poems \textit{Ragnarsdrápa} and \textit{Haustlǫng}. Although the poem is only preserved in the medieval written text \textit{Skáldskarpamál}, the prose in \textit{Laxdæla saga} offers a description of Úlfr’s performance of the poem, paying attention to contextual information such as the hall space and fire (see Chapter 3.5). As with \textit{Ragnarsdrápa}, in \textit{Húsdrápa} the skáld once again begins with a conventional call to attention. Here, Úlfr declares that he is reciting (\textit{kveðja}) praise whilst offering the sacred mead of poetry to his listening audience, something that arguably opens doors into a mythological world (see

\textsuperscript{537} Nordal, \textit{Tools of Literacy}, pp. 70-7.
\textsuperscript{538} \textit{Skáldskaparmál} (ed. Faulkes, p. 69). All quotations from \textit{Ragnarsdrápa}, \textit{Húsdrápa} and \textit{Haustlǫng} that come from \textit{Snorra Edda} are taken from this edition unless otherwise stated.
\textsuperscript{539} \textit{Edda} (trans. Faulkes, p. 120). All translations of \textit{Ragnarsdrápa}, \textit{Húsdrápa} and \textit{Haustlǫng} are taken from this edition, unless otherwise stated.
\textsuperscript{540} \textit{Skáldskarpamál} (ed. Faulkes, pp. 18-9,) and \textit{Laxdæla saga} (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 80).
Chapters 2.7 and 3.5-3.7) and also suggests that the poet has had direct contact with the gods:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Hoddmíldum ték híldar} \\
\text{hugreifum Óleifi} — \\
\text{hann vil ek at gjof Grímnis} — \\
\text{geð-Njarðar lá} — kveðja.\textsuperscript{541}
\end{align*}
\]

(‘I bring heart-glad Ólafr Hildr’s noise-maker’s [Óðinn’s] mind-ford [breast] liquid [mead]. I will greet him with Grímnir’s [Óðinn’s] gift [poetry].’\textsuperscript{542})

Like the other two shield poems \textit{Ragnarsdrápa} and \textit{Húsdrápa}, Þjóðólfr’s twenty-strophe poem \textit{Haustlǫng} is also preserved in \textit{Skáldskaparmál}. The poem narrates two mythological scenes that include Þór’s battle with the giant Hrungnir and the abduction of Íðunn and her apples. In \textit{Haustlǫng}, supposedly composed by the ninth-century Norwegian Þjóðólfr of Hvin according to \textit{Snorra Edda}, no explicit call to attention has been preserved. Nevertheless, the following fragmentary strophe certainly has an ‘introductory’ feel to it as the \textit{skáld} asks a rhetorical question that essentially sets up or enables the rest of the performer’s poetic recitation:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Hvé skalk got at gjöldum} \\
\text{gunnveggjar brú leggia} \\
\ldots \\
\text{raddkleif at þórleifir.}\textsuperscript{543}
\end{align*}
\]

(‘How can I provide a repayment for the war-wall-bridge [shield]? <I received a well-decorated...> voice-cliff [shield] from Þórleifr.’\textsuperscript{544})

As can be seen above, all three poems begin their call to attention by directly addressing a named, living figure (Hrafnkétill, Ólafr and Þórleifr respectively) who may, at some point,

\textsuperscript{541} Skáldskaparmál (ed. Faulkes, p. 14).
\textsuperscript{542} Edda (trans. Faulkes, p. 71).
\textsuperscript{543} Skáldskaparmál (ed. Faulkes, p. 30).
\textsuperscript{544} Edda (trans. Faulkes, p. 86).
have been present in the audience, thereby connecting the semi-sacred words spoken with the listening audience in the real world. In terms of live performance, these skálds’ opening (upphaf) and closing strophes also served an important function as a clear metacommunicative signal to those in the smoky, noisy mead hall that a performance was about to begin. Like the famous call to attention Hwæt! in the Anglo-Saxon epic Beowulf or a Chinese storyteller striking two stones together before beginning his narration, they underline that a skáld needed to use noise in order to attract his (presumably rowdy) audience’s attention.545

Of course, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that the skáld would not only have used his words alone to attract and maintain the audience’s attention. As in many live performances, the skáld’s use of gesture (such as raising his hands for silence), space (such as standing above or away from the audience to create a separate performance space whilst focusing attention on himself), and facial expression (such as making eye-contact with audience members to hold their attention) would have presumably also played an important role in signalling to the audience the start of a self-conscious artistic performance. Nevertheless, by beginning to speak in the highly artificial, audibly distinct skaldic metre and diction the skáld would have been engaging a clear shift in register that would have marked off his speech as different from everyday language (as noted in Chapters 2.3-2.7). This would have automatically changed the atmosphere, as when a musician starts playing or a singer starts singing. As noted earlier, those present would have also needed to cognitively ‘code-switch’ in order to understand and interpret what the skáld was saying.546 As Bauman explains:

> performance represents a transformation of the basic referential [...] uses of language. In other words, in an artistic performance of this kind, there is something going on in the communicative interchange which says to the auditor, ‘interpret what I say in some special sense; do not take it to mean what the words alone, taken

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545 For further discussion of the metacommunicative Hwæt! in the Anglo-Saxon epic Beowulf and the striking of stones by the Chinese storyteller, see: Foley, How to Read an Oral Poem, p. 117.
546 Judy Quinn raises the idea that in eddic poems such as Skírnismál and Fafnismál, the metrical switch from metres such as ljóðaháttr (‘song metre’) into galdralag (‘charm or spell metre’) would signal a similar change in register to the listening audience, who would thus interpret what the poet was saying differently (i.e. as a curse or magic charm, no longer just poetry.) For more information on this interesting article, see: Quinn, J., ‘Verseform and Voice in Eddic Poems: the Discourse of Fafnismál’, Arkiv for Nordisk Filologi 107 (1992), 100-30.
literally, would convey!’ This may lead to further suggestion that performance sets up, or represents, an interpretive frame within which the messages being communicated are to be understood, and that this frame contrasts with at least one other frame, the literal.\textsuperscript{547}

In short, by changing the atmosphere and mood of the room from ‘everyday’ feasting, conversation and merriment to that of receiving an artistic, supernaturally-charged performance spoken by the mysterious figure of the skáld, those present would have needed to engage a new or altered lens for viewing the performer and his actions (showing-doing). In addition, by placing an interpretive frame around the performance event or happening, both the audience and poet-performer would be engaging in a two-way process of heightened interaction, a mutual understanding or contract in which both parties (audience and performer) agreed (not necessarily consciously) to take part in a moment of make-belief as they jointly entered the world of mythological language and mythological reference, which might be compared to a priest reading from a Bible or an Imam leading prayers in a Mosque. In short, through this suspension of reality both the skáld and his spectators would arguably have temporarily become participants in a shared performance ‘game’ played according to their own jointly recognised cultural, religious and artistic rules (see Chapter 3). It could be argued that in Húsdrápa the poet Úlfr clearly not only marks out the time frame of this new play space for his audience by not only signalling the start of his performance, but also explicitly communicating when he comes to the end of his performance, thereby firmly closing its liminal boundaries. The strophe in question reads as follows:

\begin{verbatim}
þar kømr á, en æri
endr bar ek mærð of hendi,
— ofra ek svá — til sævar,
sverðregns — lofi þegna.\textsuperscript{548}
\end{verbatim}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{547} Bauman, \textit{Verbal Art as Performance}, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{548} \textit{Skálaskaparmál} (ed. Faulkès, p. 84, verse 303).
\end{footnotesize}
(‘There the river arrives at the sea, and once more I handed over a praise poem to the messenger of sword-rain [> battle > warrior]; thus I uplift the praise of men.’)\(^{549}\)

While Úlfr’s image of the performer handing over his poem (\textit{bar [...] af hendí}) and lifting up his patron’s praise (\textit{afra [...] lofi þegna}) clearly resonates with the skaldic conception of poetry as a concrete acoustic sound object that ‘launches off’ like a ship (see Chapter 2.7), it also suggests that \textit{skálds} conceived their long \textit{drápur} as complete performances that were distinctly separate from ordinary behaviour and communication. To create such clearly defined temporal boundaries, the \textit{skáld} felt the need to mark not only the ‘beginning’ but also the ‘end’ of his performance, just like the concert pianist who takes a bow at the end of his recital.\(^{550}\)

It thus seems reasonable to suggest on the basis of this evidence in the shield poems \textit{Ragnarsdrápa}, \textit{Haustríng} and \textit{Húsdrápa}, that the \textit{skálds} not only composed their poems as items delineated in terms of sound and space with the intention of live performance, but also intended their liminal play spaces to be experienced in a certain way. As noted above, the supernaturally-gifted \textit{skáld} would certainly have brought an element of the ‘otherworld’ into play during his performance merely by voicing the cryptic and mythologically-coded language of Óðinn and bringing vivid scenes of ancient gods and heroes to life in front of the audience.\(^{551}\) Nonetheless, it is not clear that the presumably pagan shield-poet necessarily wanted to place a wholly-religious or ritual frame around his performance, like that which seems to have been associated with some eddic poems or even \textit{Eiríksmál}. As has been stressed above (see Chapter 1.8), unlike the \textit{dialogic} eddic poems that Terry Gunnell has argued required the poet-performer to play the role of, or essentially \textit{become}, the speaking god (thereby encouraging a direct liminal encounter between audience and otherworld), in the three shield poems the \textit{skáld} does not seem to have been concerned with either acting or impersonating any character at all but rather describing an object that he sees. In shield

\(^{549}\) \textit{Edda} (trans. Faulkes, p. 133).

\(^{550}\) \textit{Arnórs þáttr jarlaskálds} offers another interesting example of such temporal performance boundaries. In this \textit{þáttr}, the poet Arnórr arrives at the court of King Magnus and King Haraldr. Arnórr ‘begins’ one poem (throughout which he is interrupted, but nevertheless continues without hesitating), and once his first poem has ‘ended’ he then moves on and ‘begins’ another. Each poetic work is thus considered as a separate, and complete, performance. See: \textit{Arnors þáttr jarlaskálds}, which is found in \textit{Morkinskinna} I. (ed. Armann Jakobsson and Pórhur Ingi Guðjónsson). For an English translation, see: \textit{The Tale of Arnor, the Poet of Earls} (trans. Jesch in \textit{The Complete Sagas of Icelanders}, pp. 335-6).

\(^{551}\) For a discussion of both the \textit{skáld} and his poetry’s association with the ‘otherworld’ and supernatural, see: Chapters 2.7 and Chapter 3.7.
poetry, the skáld’s prevailing mode of speech was that of third-person narrative in which he seems to have distanced himself and his audience from the narrative action by using the preterite tense. In Ragnarsdrápa, for example, Bragi offers a vivid description of Þormunrekkkr awakening to a bloody scene of chopped up limbs, blood-soaked benches and chaos in the hall. In this description, however, the skáld occupies the position of omniscient extra-diagnostic narrator rather than that of the eye-witness player in the action, as the following strophe demonstrates:

Knátti eðr við illan
Þormunrekkkr at vakna
með dreymfær dróttir
draum í sverða flaumi
Rósta varð í ranni
Randvés hofuðniðja
þás hrafnbláir hefndu
harma Erps of barmar.552

(’And then Þormunrekkkr did then awake with an unpleasant dream in a torrent of swords among blood-stained troops. There was uproar in Randver’s chief kinsmen’s [> Þormunrekk’s] hall when Erp’s raven-black brothers avenged their injuries.’)553

Flaut of set við sveita
sóknar álfs á gólfi
hraeva dogg, þars höggnar
hendr, sem foetr of kenndu.
Fell i blóði blandinn
brunn olskakki runna
— þat er á Leifa landa
laufi fátt — at haufði.554

552 Skáldskaparmál (ed. Faulkes, p. 50, verse 154).
(‘Corpse-dew [>] blood] flowed over the benches together with the attack elf’s [>] warrior’s [>] Jǫrmunrekkr’s] blood on the floor where severed arms and legs could be recognised. Men’s ale-giver [>] king] fell head-first into the pool mixed with gore. This is depicted on leaf of Leifi’s lands [>] sea [>] sea’s leaf [>] painted shield].’)\(^{555}\)

Nonetheless, one can also imagine effective reference to the audience’s own hall surroundings, possibly aided by something as simple as the performer’s hand movement gesturing to the benches in the physical space of the hall which would have brought the past into closer connection with the present. *Húsdrápa* is even further ‘away’ in that most of the narrative also occurs in the mythic-heroic past:

\[Fullǫflug lét fjalla\]
\[framm haf-Sleipnir þramma\]
\[Hildr, en Hropts of gildar\]
\[hjalmelda mar felldu.\]\(^{556}\)

(‘The most powerful mountain-Hild [>]giantess] made the sea-Sleipnir [>]ship] lumber forward, while Hropt’s [>]Óðinn’s] helmet-fire-power-investors [>]berserks] felled her steed.’\(^{557}\)

The same occurs in *Haustlǫng*, where the poet speaks as an omniscient third-person narrator, as in the example below:

\[Segjǫndum fló sagna\]
\[snótar úlfr at móti\]
\[í gemlis ham gömlum\]
\[glamma ó-fyr-skómmu.\]
\[Settisk ǫrn, par er æsir\]

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\(^{555}\) *Edda* (trans. Faulkes, p. 106).

\(^{556}\) *Skáldskaparmál* (ed. Faulkes, p. 70, verse 242).

\(^{557}\) *Edda* (trans. Faulkes, p. 121).
He even uses a special distancing technique to separate himself from the narrative action:

— vas pat fyr lòngu —

(‘that was long ago.’)

Interestingly, this distancing technique echoes the technique that the poet used in Helgakviða Hundingsbana II:

Ár var alda þat er arar gullo.

(‘It was a long time ago that the eagles shrieked.’)

It thus appears that during live performance the skálds in question wanted to keep the illusory world of the story somewhat separate from the audience’s own reality by constantly reminding the audience of his physical presence amongst all of them and the story’s distance. At the same time, however, it appears that the skáld was keen to imply his Odinnic, semi-shamanistic role of being able to ‘see’ things from the otherworld that the audience

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558 Skáldskaparmál (ed. Faulkes, pp. 30-31, verse 93).
560 Skáldskaparmá (ed. Faulkes, p. 31, verse 97).
561 Edda (trans. Faulkes, p. 87).
562 Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrri (Edda, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn, p. 130). My translation. This phrase also echoes that uttered by the mysterious female seeress known as the völva in the eddic poem Völuspá in strophe (3): Ár var alda, þat er Ymir bygði (‘It was long ago / that when Ymir [> an ancient primeval being or giant] lived’) in Völuspá 3 (Edda, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn, p. 1). Presumably, this somewhat formulaic phrase may have worked as what Bauman calls a key to poetic registers, by immediately signalling the ancient mythological or heroic past to the listening audience. For further discussion of performance keys and signals, see: Bauman, Verbal Art as Performance, pp. 15-24.
themselves could not see. In live performance, the skálds sometimes worked to take on the role of supernaturally-gifted mediators. All three shield-poems are characterised at some point or another by the skáld’s own voice punctuating his otherwise third person narrative descriptions, often in the key defining position at the start of strophes. In Ragnarsdrápa, for example, Bragi says:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{þat erumk sent at snemma} \\
\text{sonr Alfoðrs vildi} \\
\text{afis við úri þafðan} \\
\text{jarðar reist of freista.}^{564}
\end{align*}
\]

(‘It was conveyed to me that the son [Þórr] of the father of mankind [Ódinn] was determined to test his strength against the water-soaked earth-band [Midgard serpent].’)\(^{565}\)

Bragi also says:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{þat segik fall á fógrum} \\
\text{flotna randar botni.} \\
\text{Ræs gjofunk reiðar mána} \\
\text{Ragnarr ok fjoðló sagna.}^{566}
\end{align*}
\]

(‘I can see this fall of warriors on the fair base of shield. Ragnarr gave me the Rae’s chariot [ship] moon [shield] and a multitude of stories with it.’)\(^{567}\)

In Haustlöng, Þjóðólfr utters:

\[^{563}\text{Of course, the mythological action that the skáld ‘sees’ may refer to the image painted on the shield or carved on the house walls, whether real or imagined. Nevertheless, even if the skáld was describing visual images he would still also have been interpreting the images from a position of greater knowledge and power: it was the skáld, and not the audience, who could ‘see’ the mythological action (both literally in terms of the shield, and symbolically in terms of his supposed Odinnic, shamanistic ‘sight’). In this sense, the skáld would quite possibly still be seen as having a supernatural channel or medium between the world of the gods and world of the audience, much like the völva in Völuspá.}\]
\[^{564}\text{Skáldskaparmál (ed. Faulkes, p. 11, verse 24).}\]
\[^{565}\text{Edda (trans. Faulkes, p. 69).}\]
\[^{566}\text{Skáldskaparmál (ed. Faulkes, p. 51, verse 158).}\]
\[^{567}\text{Edda (trans. Faulkes, p. 106).}\]
Gǫrla lit ek á Geitis

garði þær of farðir.

Baugs þá ek bifum fáða

bifkleif at þórleifi.\textsuperscript{568}

\begin{quote}
\textquote{‘Clearly I see these deeds on Geitir’s fence [> the shield], I received the border’s moving cliff [> shield] decorated with horrors from Þórleifr.’}\textsuperscript{569}
\end{quote}

and he also says, now commenting on his mythological insight:

\begin{quote}
\textquote{Mjók frá ek móti hrøkkva

myrkbeins Haka reinar,

þás vígligan, vagna

vátt, sinn bana þátti.}\textsuperscript{570}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textquote{‘I have heard that the watcher [> Hruggedir] of the dark bone [> rock] of the land [> sea] of Haki’s carriages [> ships] moved violently in opposition when he saw his warlike slayer.’}\textsuperscript{571}
\end{quote}

The same occurs in \textit{Húsdrápa}, where the poet’s voice is again heard punctuating the narrative, now stressing another deeper form of sight:

\begin{quote}
\textquote{þar hykk sigrunni svinnum

sylgs valkyrjur fylgja

heilags tafns ok hrafna.

Hlaut innan svá minnum.}\textsuperscript{572}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{568} \textit{Skáldskaparmál} (ed. Faulkes, p. 24, verse 71).
\textsuperscript{569} \textit{Edda} (trans. Faulkes, p. 81).
\textsuperscript{570} \textit{Skáldskaparmál} (ed. Faulkes, p. 23, verse 67).
\textsuperscript{571} \textit{Edda} (trans. Faulkes, p.80).
\textsuperscript{572} \textit{Skáldskaparmál} (ed. Faulkes, p. 9, verse 14).
There I perceive valkyries and ravens accompanying the wise victory-tree [Óðinn] to the drink of the holy offering [Baldr’s funeral feast]. Within [i.e. the hall, tapestry] have appeared these motifs.’\(^{573}\)

and, less directly:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ríðr} & \at \text{vilti víðu} \\
\text{víðfrægr} & \text{, (en mér líða)}, \\
\text{Hroptatýr} & \text{, (of hvapta} \\
\text{hróðrmôl)}, & \text{sonar báli.}^{574}
\end{align*}
\]

(‘Far-famed Hropta-Týr [Óðinn] rides to the mighty broad pyre of his son, and from my jaws flow words of praise.’\(^{575}\))

On one hand, these self-referential comments served to authenticate the \textit{skáld}'s narrative. By describing what he could see on the shield (whether physically present during performance or simply imagined), and describing what he had \textit{heard} from other speakers or storytellers, the \textit{skáld} gave validity to his narrative which sought trust — and belief — from his audience. On the other hand, these first-person announcements served to remind the audience not only of the \textit{skáld}'s personal presence in the performance space but also of his central role as a \textit{performer}, as a self-conscious entertainer offering his skills for the pleasure and judgement of his viewing audience, whether it be in the ninth-century Norwegian court or in Ólafur pái’s grand hall in Iceland. Indeed, Bengt Holbek argues that in modern oral performance and storytelling:

\textit{During the narration of the tale [the storyteller] continually addresses his audience, in this way making sure that he keeps a constant psychological contact with it. For this reason he is often showered with remarks from his listeners, bursts of laughter.}\(^{576}\)

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\(^{573}\) \textit{Edda} (ed. Faulkes, p. 68).

\(^{574}\) \textit{Skáldskaparmál} (ed. Faulkes, p. 8, verse 8).

\(^{575}\) \textit{Edda} (trans. Faulkes, p. 67).
come from the audience, jokes, etc, so that the whole of the performance acquires the form of a collective experience of the tale.\textsuperscript{576}

Such self-reflexive comments by the \textit{skáld} would no doubt have ensured that the audience’s focus remained as much on the performer and his deliberate, artistic \textit{performance} as they did on the verbal text or narrative of the poem itself.

Although keen to keep the audience’s attention on himself as the mediating figure between two worlds that existed simultaneously during performance (that of the gods or ancient heroes in the \textit{skáld}’s poetic narrative and that of the audience’s own reality in the hall), in some cases it appears that the \textit{skáld} deliberately intended to weaken the boundaries between the audience and narrative action by bringing the two into closer contact. Occasionally, a \textit{skáld} might deliberately switch from the preterite into the present tense, as occurs in the strophes describing the procession of gods to Baldr’s funeral in \textit{Húsdrápa}:\textsuperscript{577}

\begin{center}
\begin{quote}
Ríðr á bǫrg til borgar
bǫðfróðr sonar Óðins
Freyr ok folkum stýrir
fyrst inum golli byrstá.\textsuperscript{578}
\end{quote}
\end{center}

(‘Battle-skilled Freyr rides in front to Óðinn’s son’s [>Baldr’s] pyre on golden-bristled boar and governs hosts.’)\textsuperscript{579}

By bringing the narrative past into the audience’s present in this way, the \textit{skáld} seems to have created a liminal moment of sacred time as the boundaries between the two worlds became temporarily weakened. During the \textit{skáld}’s live performance, the narrative action is no longer an event that has previously happened: it is happening \textit{now}, occurring at a particular moment of time, as Freyr rides his boar straight out of the mythological past an

\textsuperscript{576} Holbek, B., \textit{Interpretation of Fairy Tales: Danish Folklore in a European Perspective} (Helsinki, 1987), pp. 213-4.
\textsuperscript{577} While this is a common feature of both saga and oral narrative, this does not reduce the influence that the use of the present tense has in bringing an account to life.
\textsuperscript{578} \textit{Skáldskaparmál} (ed. Faulkes, p. 19, verse 63).
\textsuperscript{579} \textit{Edda} (trans. Faulkes, p. 75).
into the performance space of the audience’s own present. A similar thing happens at one point in *Haustlöng* when the *skáld* seems to get so excited in a moment of breathless enjambment that he loses himself in the ‘flow’\(^{580}\) of his poetic storytelling completely:

\[\text{Urðut bjartra borða} \\
byggvendr at þat hryggvir: \\
pá var lð- með jótnum \\
-uðr nýkomin sunnan. \\
Górðusk allar áttir \\
Ingvi-Freys at þingi \\
— váru heldr — ok hárar \\
— hamljót regin — gamlar, \\
unz hrynsævar hræva \\
hund ðl-Gefnar fundu \\
leiðþir ok læva \\
lund ðl-Gefnar bundu. \\
„Þú skalt véltr, nema vélum,” \\
vreið rælir svá „leiðir \\
munstærandi mæra \\
meyp apr, Loki, hapta.\(^{581}\)
\]

(‘The bright-shield-dwellers [> giants] were not unhappy after this, now Iðunn was among the giants, newly arrived from the south. All Ingvi-Freyr’s kin [> Æsir] became old and grey in their assembly; the powers were rather ugly in form,

— until they found ale-Gefn’s [> Iðunn’s] flowing corpse-sea [> blood] hound [> wolf, thief, i.e. Loki] and bound the thief, that tree of deceit, who had led ale-Gefn off.

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\(^{580}\) Schechner uses the word *flow* to refer to a state of play (and, to an extent, ritual) in which the performer becomes so lost in the experience of make-belief that he loses all self-awareness and becomes one with the part that he or she is playing. See: Schechner, *Performance Studies*, pp. 97-9. In modern storytelling, for example, performers often get caught up in the story that they are telling that they momentarily ‘become’ one of their characters. See below for further discussion.

\(^{581}\) *Skáldsóknarmál* (ed. Faulkes, pp. 32-33, verses 101-102).
“You shall be trapped, Loki,” the angry one spoke thus, “unless by some scheme you bring back the renowned maid, enlarger of the fetters' [gods'] joy.”

By ‘breaking the rules’ of shield-poetry and engaging in direct speech without warning, it appears that the poet-performer goes even further and momentarily steps out of his role as storyteller and instead takes on the role of ‘the angry one’ (presumably Óðinn) in a move more akin to the performance dynamic of monologic and dialogic eddic poems. This would have naturally worked to strengthen the skáld’s otherworldliness and at the same time opened doors into another world and another time, as the audience ‘heard’ the gods themselves.

In modern-day live storytelling such switching between third person and first person (speaking as the character, and not as the self-conscious performer) is common, particularly when the storyteller himself gets caught up in the fun and ‘make belief’ of his own narration. It is also a common feature of ghost stories, for example, that the storyteller will use direct speech in order to (consciously or unconsciously) add an element of reality when the ghost speaks directly. In fact, the oral scholar Röhrich gives an example of a storyteller who is sometimes: ‘so captivated by the experience that he completely forgets reality; by suddenly switching himself from the third to the first person, he becomes the hero of the story himself.’ In short, by speaking as the angry god (presumably Óðinn) the poet-performer of Haustlöng, at least for a moment, effectively becomes the god. In doing so, it seems that the skáld goes one step further in underlining his implicit parallels with the higher powers by going beyond the role of skaldic storyteller and in a liminal moment temporarily becoming a sort of skaldic shaman through whom the god speaks to the audience. By doing this, he is not only pushing, but momentarily wholly collapsing, the boundaries between the two worlds by bringing the audience directly into contact with the supernatural powers themselves.

Þjóðolfr’s use of direct speech in Haustlöng offers a notable exception to the usual mode of delivery in the three shield poems. It can be argued, however, that there were nonetheless other ways for a skaldic performer to inhabit or portray characters within his

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582 Edda (trans. Faulkes, pp. 87-88).
583 See Chapter 1.8 for a thorough discussion of Gunnell’s performance-based approach to the eddic poems.
584 For example, see: Zimmermann, G. D., The Irish Storyteller (Dublin, 2001), p. 494.
elaborate poetic descriptions of mythic-heroic narrative which did not rely on the use of first-person speech. Like any modern storyteller, even when the skaldic performer was not explicitly ‘becoming’ a god by engaging in direct speech, he would still have made extensive use of his extra-lexical skill set, including body language, facial expression and vocal range to bring the characters and action to life’ (as noted above, with reference to the hall setting, which need little more than a couple of gestures to bring two worlds into contact). In some cases, the extant poetic text gives us clues as to how a performer may have animated a character or scene during performance. For example, it is tempting to imagine deitic references such as þar or verbs denoting action to have involved some sort of accompanying gesture like pointing. Indeed, it is almost impossible to imagine the skilled skaldic performer standing still like a plank of wood without making use of his body, voice, physical space and even the audience around him, especially if he wanted to hold the inebriated audience’s attention. Fieldwork by oral scholars has demonstrated just how crucial gestures and sound are to the storyteller’s live performance. In his examination of live storytelling, Sándor claims that during live performance:

The whole man is narrating, not only with the modulation of his voice, but with the variable compass of his glance, his expression, his movements and his behaviour [...] Narrowing or enlarging the pupils, fixing the glance in a certain direction, lifting or closing the eye-lids, lifting or frowning the eyebrows – all this can suggest a number of emotional conditions and characteristics. Pursing or curling up the lips opening the mouth, chewing, sticking out the tongue, gnashing the teeth etc. are equally forceful expressive means. Bending the head forwards, backwards or sideways, up and down, to the right or left may also be meaningful [...] Usually the narrator is sitting while telling the tale, but it may occur that he gets up, goes up and down, jumps, dances during certain passages of the tale.  

Of course, without video recordings or eye-witness descriptions of how the skáld looked, moved and sounded, it is impossible to guess how different performers used their extra-lexical skills during live performance. Nonetheless, modern recordings of storytellers, stand-

up comedians and slam poets show how simple gestures can transform oral narratives. A recording of Verney February, a modern African storyteller, brilliantly captures the performer’s use of subtle modulations of voice and gestures to momentarily ‘invoke’ or become the characters in the third-person accounts that he narrates. On several occasions, sound effects aid February’s actions. Using a ‘slithering’ movement with one hand, February makes a harsh ‘sssssssshhhhhh’ noise, evoking the snakes of his story which wind their way down to a waterhole. In a similar manner, he makes a curious half fist to represent mice, followed by a high-pitched, fast-paced ‘peep-peep-peep.’ It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that during a skáld’s performance of his shield-poem, the poet-performer would have similarly used gesture, posture, facial expression and voice to bring the characters of Þórr, Loki, jötnar and other supernatural beings to life in front of the audience where possible.

By speaking in the third-person preterite and punctuating his performance with self-conscious references, it appears that the skaldic storyteller could bring both his audience and the gods and heroes into the same ‘play space’ but also keep them separate, positioning himself between them both like a barrier, and simultaneously a bridge, between two worlds, collapsing the boundaries as quickly as he would re-construct them. Rather than impersonating a god or supernatural being directly (as in some eddic poems) it appears that in shield poetry the skáld, like the performer of wondertales and legends could take the form of a tour-guide, a medium who took his audience on a journey into the world of the gods but was careful not to bring them into direct contact with one another. It thus seems reasonable to argue that although the skaldic shield-poet in pre-Christian times functioned as a medium or spiritual channel speaking in the language of Óðinn and ‘seeing’ into the mythological past, it nonetheless seems that he used his skills as a storyteller to transport, but not necessarily spiritually transform his audience, as arguably happens in Eiríksmál and Hákonarmál. As such, it is reasonable to argue that in the three poems Ragnarsdrápa, Haustlǫng and Húsdrápa, ritual or religious efficacy was neither the desired function nor effect of the skálds’ performance. Instead, by show-casing his skill as a self-conscious

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587 From the series Many Voices, One World, which was made for the Ministry for Development Cooperation, Netherlands, in cooperation with NCO, NOS, UNESCO and CTC (CTC 1990). Another example in which animals, actions and comic re-actions are brought to life by the skill of the storyteller is in Billy Connolly’s Spider, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oc5R2lodSk4 (viewed 25 November, 2014) and Wilderbeestie, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJnn78AoXI (viewed 25 November, 2014).
performer and fashioning his own piece of ekphrastic art, the *skáld* took on the role of storyteller and his performance was framed more by ‘play’ as he sought to entertain, and not permanently change, his audience, even if the entertainment contained living glimpses into another world.

4.3. *Sound Poetry: Ninth-Century Skaldic Verse*

Not all *skálds* composed their praise by describing the images on elaborately painted shields or carved walls: in most cases, the *skáld* composed praise for his patron directly. Some of the earliest skaldic praise poems that we have preserved are believed to have originated in the ninth-century court of King Haraldr *hárfragri*. Unlike the later praise poems connected to the tenth-century Norwegian Jarl Hákon, praise poetry for Haraldr was much less concerned with politicising mythology (see below). Instead, like shield poetry the focus of these early skaldic poems appears to be on their role as semi-musical entertainment or ‘play’, recounting historical events through vibrant soundscapes and interesting modes of presentation.

Like the shield poems discussed above (see Chapter 4.2), the poem *Hrafnsmál* (or *Haraldskvæði*) apparently composed by Haraldr’s court poet Þorbjörn *hornklofi* in the late ninth-century blurs the boundaries between the world of the gods and the audience’s own world of the hall.\(^{588}\) The poem has been subject to a complicated written transmission, as it remains in the form of various written verses preserved in several different sagas and manuscripts. Whilst *Fagrskinna* preserves all of the extant verses except for strophes 12-4, *Heimskringla* preserves strophes 6-11 and strophe 14. In addition, *Flateyjarbók* preserves strophes 7-11, 13-4 and strophe 21. Given the complex transmission of *Hrafnsmál*, scholars have debated both the unity of the strophes (whether they should be viewed as part of more than one poem) and the authorship of certain verses, which are occasionally attributed to Þjóðólfur of Hvin.\(^{589}\) Nevertheless, despite the questions and complexities

\(^{588}\) For further studies that discuss aspects of *Hrafnsmál*, see: Gunnell, “‘The Rights of the Player’”, pp. 1-31; and Self, K. M., ‘The Valkyrie’s Gender: Old Norse Shield-Maidens and Valkyries as a Third Gender’, Feminist Formations 26.1 (2014), 143-72. For a full bibliography, see: Poetry From the Kings’ Sagas I: From Mythical Times to c. 1035, ed. D. Whaley.

\(^{589}\) In *Fagrskinna*, for example, strophes 1-6 and 15-9 are explicitly attributed to Þjóðólfur of Hvin whilst in *Flateyjarbók*, strophes 13-4 are also attributed to Þjóðólfur. Interestingly, in *Heimskringla*, which was allegedly the work of Snorri Sturluson, strophes 7-11 and strophe 14 are attributed to Þorbjörn, whereas in Snorri’s prose *Edda*, strophe 11 is instead attributed to Þjóðólfur. See: *Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)* (ed. R. D. Fulk, pp. 91-4) for further discussion.
surrounding the poem *Hrafnsmál*. R. D. Fulk, in his contribution to the Skaldic Poetry Project, regards the poem as a complete unit composed by Þorbjôrn hornklofi.\(^{590}\)

Whilst it is easy to become caught up in discussing the intricacies of the poem’s preservation dating and authorship, it is just as easy to forget the lively performance dynamic that is still present in the physical remains of the poem (that is, the poem’s verbal text). One of the most interesting aspects of the poem *Hrafnsmál*, for example, is that it stands out from most other skaldic praise poems as it engages the eddic metres málaháttr (‘speech metre’) and ljóðaháttr (‘song metre’) rather than traditional dróttkvætt.\(^{591}\) In fact, Fulk argues that the poem is ‘more reminiscent of eddic than skaldic poetry’ not only in terms of metre, but also diction and syntactic construction: kennings are rare and unobscured, whilst word order is relatively straightforward.\(^{592}\) One of the most striking features of all is arguably the semi-dramatic set-up of Þorbjôrn’s poem. Unlike the third-person narrative mode employed by skaldic shield-poets (see Chapter 4.2), who rarely used direct speech in their poetic compositions apart from one noticeable exception in *Haustlǫng*, in *Hrafnsmál* the poet opts for a seemingly unique approach by structuring his poetic performance as a dialogue between a talking raven and a female valkyrie. By structuring his poem as a question and answer dialogue, Þorbjôrn recounts the marriage, military prowess and various deeds of King Haraldr há fagrí via a dramatic mode that is more akin to the eddic dialogue poems (such as Grímnismál, Skírnismál, Sigdrifumál, Lokasenna, Fáfnismál and of course Eirkísmál and Hákonarmál) rather than the later form of stereotypical court praise.\(^{593}\)

In terms of live performance, the semi-dramatic mode of Þorbjôrn’s poem *Hrafnsmál* would have almost certainly afforded the audience a unique watching and listening experience. In many ways, Þorbjôrn follows skaldic performance convention: in the opening verses, for example, the poet-performer begins with the usual call to attention like those in the shield poems (see Chapter 4.1.) and those discussed in Chapter 2:

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590 Haraldskvæði (*Hrafnsmál*) (ed. R. D. Fulk, in Whaley pp. 91-4
591 Two other noticeable exceptions to the use of dróttkvætt in skaldic praise are the two poems Eiríksmál and Hákonarmál, both of which employ eddic metres. As Terry Gunnell has already conducted a Performance Studies analysis on these two poems, I will not examine these works further. Instead, I refer the reader to Gunnell’s forthcoming article, ‘The Uses of Performance Studies for the Study of Old Norse Religion’ (discussed above in Chapter 1.8).
592 Haraldskvæði (*Hrafnsmál*) (ed. Fulk, p. 93).
593 For an analysis of these dialogic eddic poems and their dramatic performance, see Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*, pp. 212-81 or Chapter 1.8 for a full list of Gunnell’s other relevant work.
Hlýði hringberendr, meðan ek frá Haraldr segi odda
ibróttir inum afarauðga.
Frá möulum mun ek segja, þeim es ek mey heyrða
hvita hakkjarta, es við hrafn dæmði.  

(‘Let sword-bearers [> warriors] listen, while I recount feats of weapon-points concerning Haraldr the exceedingly wealthy. I shall recount the words that I heard a white, bright-haired girl [utter] when she spoke with a raven.’)  

As noted earlier, like the shield-poets’ call to attention, such a self-conscious bid for hearing was clearly part of the social ritual of skaldic performance and indicates the element of sound, hearing, audience, space and performance as occurs in Beowulf. As the same time, it is somewhat reminiscent of the supernatural völva’s declaration at the beginning of Völuspá:

Hlióðs bið ec allar helgar kindir
meiri oc minni,
þeim es ek mey heyrða
vildo, at ec, Valfǫðr,
vel fyrtelia
forn spjöll fira,
þau er fremst um man?  

(‘I bid hearing from all holy people / greater or lesser the children of Heimdallr. / Do you wish that I, Valfǫðr [> Óðinn] should reckon up / the ancient histories about men and gods / those which I remember from the very first?’)

Like the völva in Völuspá and the shield poets who use verbs of ‘seeing’ and ‘hearing’, suggests that he, Þorbjǫrn, has personally ‘heard’ (heyrða) mythological information being passed on by characters in the otherworld. Just as the skaldic storytellers discussed in Chapter 4.2 became a sort of skaldic ‘shaman’ during ive performance, it appears that, having apparently been in contact with the supernatural realm, the performer in Hrafnsmál

\[\text{Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)}\] (ed. Whaley, p. 94).
\[\text{Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)}\] (trans. Whaley, p. 94).
\[\text{Völuspá (Edda, ed. Neckel and rev. Kuhn, p. 1).}\]
immediately sets up and plays on the idea of the *skáld* as a supernatural channel and thus raises his own role in front of the audience to a higher level.

It thus seems reasonable to suggest that in a performance of *Hrafnsmál* the performer (whether Þorbjörn himself, or another *skáld* entirely) would have entered the realm of ‘make belief’ and ‘play’, not least because the poetic performance would have involved elements of dramatic role-play. Although on one level we see the *skáld* taking on the role of omniscient narrator or ‘skaldic storyteller’ by self-consciously recounting the deeds of King Haraldr, the use of dialogue would have changed the dynamic of the performance completely. After his introductory narrative strophes (strophes 1 and 2), the poet suddenly engages in direct speech, speaking as the female valkyrie without any prior forewarning, as is demonstrated in strophe 3:

„*Hvat es yðr, hrafnar? Hvaðan eruð ér komnir með dreyrgru nefi* at degi ǫndverðum? *Hold lodir yðr i klóum; hraes þefr gengr ór munni; nær hygg ek yðr i nótt bjoggu, því es vissuð nái liggja.*“

(“What is the matter with you, raven? From where have you come with gory beaks at break of day? Flesh hangs from your claws; the stench of carrion comes from your mouth; I think you lodged last night near where you knew corpses were lying.”)

By suddenly speaking as the female valkyrie and asking direct questions, whilst possibly making eye-contact with various audience members in a bid to engage them in the make belief of the performance, the skaldic performer would have momentarily *become* the mythological figure, allowing the valkyrie to not only materialise before the audience’s very eyes, but interact with directly. Unlike Þjóðólfr’s outburst earlier noted in *Haustlöng*, where he engages in direct speech after becoming seemingly lost in the flow of storytelling, it appears that Þorbjörn was much more in control over his use of dialogue. In fact, in his opening strophes the poet seems to switch between the roles of valkyrie, raven and third-person storyteller with relative ease. Furthermore, he seems determined to make the

597 *Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)* (ed. Fulk, p. 96).
598 *Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)* (trans. Fulk, p. 97).
transition between characters as clear and as uncomplicated as possible. After speaking as
the valkyrie in strophe 3, for example, the poet momentarily steps back in to the role of
narrator in order to comment on the raven’s reaction to the valkyrie’s questions, before
speaking as the raven directly, as demonstrated here in strophe 4:

\[\text{Hreyfðisk inn høsfjardri, ok of hyrnu þerrði,} \]
\[\text{arnar eðbróðir, ok at andsvorum hugði:} \]
\[\text{``Haraldi vér fylgðum syni Halfdanar} \]
\[\text{ungum ynglingi síðan ór eggi kvømum."}^{599}\]

(‘The grey-feathered sworn-brother of the eagle [> raven] gloated and wiped its bill,
and gave thought to the answer: “We have followed Haraldr son of Hálfdan, the
young king, since we emerged from the egg.”’\(^{600}\)

From this strophe it is clear that, unlike the shield poets who switched between preterite
and present tense and the modern storytellers switch between third- and first-person
narration (see Chapter 4.2), Þorbjörn does not switch characters without warning. In fact, it
could be argued that the narrative leading up to the raven’s speech in the first two lines
functioned as much to inform the audience of the performer’s role switch as it did to allow
the performer to get ‘into character’. It is not impossible to imagine that during live
performance in which the skáld was bringing a character to life, he may have used gestures
such as wiping his nose (as the raven wipes his bill) and grinning (as the raven gloats) in
order to not only differentiate the character of the raven from the valkyrie and the narrator-
performer, but to also enhance the audience’s experience of entertainment and make belief.
In other words, by speaking as both the female valkyrie and the raven, who are having a
conversation with one another, the performer would in a sense have momentarily become
these characters for his audience: as such, his words would have taken on extra supernatural
significance for those watching and listening in the audience.\(^{601}\) Once again, by actually
becoming these characters and bringing the live audience into direct contact with the
otherworldly figures of a speaking raven (possibly one of Óðinn’s birds?) and the female

\(^{599}\) Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál) (ed. Fulk, p. 97).
\(^{600}\) Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál) (trans. Fulk, p. 97).
\(^{601}\) Gunnell refers to a similar dynamic in his article on Eiríksmál, which also involves a speaking valkyrie. See:
Gunnell, ‘The Uses of Performance Studies for the Study of Old Norse Religion.’
chooser of the slain, the performer would have temporarily broken down the boundaries and lifted the veil between the two worlds completely, like a skaldic shaman. The audience would now not only have *heard* about the otherworld: they would have *seen* it in the shape of the performer.

Despite mythological elements underpinning Þorbjörn’s poem *Hrafnsmál*, it seems reasonable to argue that the function of his poem (aside from praise) was primarily as playful entertainment for his audience, raising the status of their ruler and, perhaps more importantly, to showcase his skill as a *skáld*. In fact, rather than transporting his audience into the mythological past in order to invoke some sort of semi-religious, ritual experience, it appears that the poet essentially remained anchored to the performance space and used the dramatic set-up of his performance as a means to comment on his own present social surroundings. After describing how generous King Haraldr was to both warriors and poets, in strophes 22 and 23, Þorbjörn mentions the presence of other performers such as named *leikarar* (‘players’) and *trúðar* (‘entertainers, jesters’) which were at Haraldr’s court and would have been known to the audience, if not actually present:

\[
\text{At leikurum ok trúðum} \\
\text{hef ek þik lítt fregit;} \\
\text{hvorr es ørgáti} \\
\text{Þeira Andaðar} \\
\text{at húsum Haralds?}^{602}
\]

(‘I have asked you little about jesters and jugglers; what is the hospitality for Andaðr and his fellows in Haraldr’s estate?’)\(^{603}\)

\[
\text{At hundi elskar Andaðr} \\
\text{ok heimsku drýgir} \\
\text{eyrnalausum} \\
\text{ok jófur hlægir.} \\
\text{Hinir eru ok aðrir,}
\]

\(^{602}\) *Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)* (ed. Fulk, p. 115).  
\(^{603}\) *Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)* (trans. Fulk, p. 115).
Andaðr fondles an earless dog, and he plays the fool and makes the king laugh. There are also others whose practice is to pass a burning wood-chip across a fire; those men who deserve kicking have tucked blazing caps under their belts.

In short, in a manner similar to the later disgruntled poet Máni (see Chapter 3.5), Þorbjørn makes a scathing remark that mocks the performers at Haraldr’s court for their lack of skill. By airing his criticism through the mouthpiece of a mythological figure, Þorbjørn’s cutting remark nonetheless goes further: the humorous image of Andaðr playing the fool and men who deserve a kicking may have been used to simply generate comedic, satirical value amongst his audience. Speaking as a semi-supernatural skáld, Máni nonetheless stresses that the leikarar’s foolish behaviour has been observed from above. Like modern-day rap battles in which the performer berates his opponent to simply entertain and earn the respect of his audience, perhaps most famously demonstrated in the film *8 Mile* starring Eminem, Þorbjørn’s almost *senna*-like jibe demonstrates the performer using the character of the mythological, supernatural talking raven to engage with his audience and courtly surroundings not only for the sake of humour. His scathing remarks suggest that gods are aware that artistic skill is slipping, and that the leikarar should know better.

In terms of function and effect, it seems reasonable to argue that ritual efficacy was not at the heart of the poet’s performance of *Hrafnsmál* although he *does* nonetheless bring mythological figures into the performance space at the start to underline his own supernatural standing, and that of King Haraldr. Although Þorbjørn’s clever dialogic or ‘dramatic’ presentation of mythology in his praise to King Haraldr would have brought certain elements of pre-Christian supernatural belief into play, it seems unlikely that the

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604 *Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)* (ed. Fulk, p. 116).
605 *Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)* (trans. Fulk, p. 116).
606 See: Gunnell “‘The Rights of the Player’”, pp. 4-10 for further discussion.
performer’s main concern was to instigate a profound religious or semi-sacred transformational experience for his audience. Given its eddic-like style and lack of complex kennings, the poem would have been relatively straightforward, easy-listening entertainment that was neither as cryptic nor highly politicised as the skaldic performances that took place later in the court of Jarl Hákon (see below). Like the shield poems discussed above (chapter 4.2), it seems reasonable to argue that the performance of Hrafnsmál was thus about generating make-belief and play for the sake of artistic entertainment and an enjoyable audience experience, not least for its main recipient.

Another ninth-century skaldic poem is Glýmdrápa (‘Clangour-poem’). In Glýmdrápa, we see another aspect of performance art as the poet-performer seems to have been especially preoccupied with audibly echoing the noise and sounds of battle rather than opening doors to supernatural personages. Unlike the storytelling shield-poets and the semi-dramatic set-up of Hrafnsmál, the poem Glýmdrápa, apparently also composed by Þorbjørn hornklofi, is arguably more akin to ‘conventional’ praise as it uses regular dróttkvætt to praise the military prowess and events in Haraldr hárfagri’s life, almost like a poetic biography. Although it is difficult to date skaldic verse with any certainty, Edith Marold nonetheless argues that it seems likely that the poem was composed in the ninth-century, as the poet apparently addresses King Haraldr hárfagri directly. In terms of preservation, the poem exists in fragmentary form as nine stanzas scattered throughout various sagas. Like Hrafnsmál, it is thus subject to a complicated transmission. What remains of the poem is preserved almost entirely in Heimskringla, where the saga prose associates the events described in the poem with the famous naval battle at Hafrsfjørð in which Haraldr hárfagri allegedly unified all of Norway. Marold notes that in Flateyjarbók, however, the poem’s strophes appear in a different order and the prose attributes the

607 Terry Gunnell argues that in the final strophes of the eddic poem Völsaspá, it is possible to ‘hear’ the sounds of the great battle known as ragnarök in a combination of pounding, cracking, horn-blowing trills and hums created by the poet’s lexical choices in a bid for sound to mirror action. See: Gunnell, ‘The Belief Contexts and Performance of Völsaspá.’ It seems that in Glýmdrápa, the poet similarly uses sounds of words to evoke the noisy onslaught of battle. For further studies that discuss Glýmdrápa, see: Abrams, C., ‘Scribal Authority in Skaldic Verse: Þorbjørn hornklofi’s Glýmdrápa’, Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi 116 (2001), 1-19 and the full bibliography in Poetry From the Kings’ Sagas I: From Mythical Times to c. 1035, ed. D. Whaley.
608 Glýmdrápa (ed. E. Marold, p. 75).
609 Glýmdrápa (ed. E. Marold, p. 73).
610 Glýmdrápa (ed. Marold, p. 75). All poems in this section (both Old Norse text and modern English Translation) are taken from Poetry From the Kings’ Sagas edited by Diana Whaley. I will thus simply refer to any verses (both in the original and translation) by the poem’s title rather than the scholarly edition from which they are taken.
military campaigns in *Glymðrápa* to Haraldr’s successful defeat of rival Norwegian troops at Moerr and Raumsdalar.611 Given the conflicting saga accounts and the allusiveness of the fragmentary verses, it is therefore unclear as to whether *Glymðrápa* narrates one campaign or several, making it difficult for scholars to analyse the historically uncertain meaning of the poem.

From a Performance Studies perspective, however, it appears that the focus of Þorbjorn’s composition was quite clearly the creation of a lively acoustic soundscape, an aural experience designed to evoke the sounds of warriors and weapons when performed aloud: he was not just thinking about the historical narrative. In fact, Edith Marold has remarked on the interesting sound-qualities and innovate rhymes all of which, as the title *Glymðrápa* suggests, are concerned with recreating the sounds of battle. In fact, Marold notes that even in the formal and structural aspects of the poem: ‘it is striking that the poem’s battle kennings and metaphors primarily convey the acoustic effects of battle.’612 In Þorbjorn’s opening stanza, it is arguably possible to hear battle sounds in the poem’s pounding rhythm and harsh consonants, which would have been easily audible to a listening audience:

```
Hílmir réð á heiði
hjaldrskíðs þrimu galdra
óðr við œskimeiða
ey vébrautar heyja,
óðr gnáspólar Gripnis
gnýstærandi færi
rausnarsamr til rimmu
riðviggs lagar skíðum.613
```

(‘The ruler commanded that the noise of the battle-plank [ > sword > battle] be launched on the heath, evtr furious at the wishing trees of the incantations of the

611 Marold, ‘Glýmdrápa’, p. 74. Strophe 8 is also preserved in Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta, where the battle is associated with Haraldr’s campaigns in the British Isles, and also in Fagrskinna where the poem’s events are attributed once more to the battle at Hafsfoðr.
613 *Glýmdrápa* (ed. Marold, p. 75)
standard-road [battlefield > battle > warriors], before the magnificent increaser of the noise of the jutting sun of the riding horse of Gripnir <sea-king> [(lit. ‘noise-increaser of the jutting sun of the riding horse of Gripnir’ > ship > shield > battle > warrior] sailed into battle with the skis of the sea [ships].’

As can been seen from the above, the strophe includes many nouns directly referring to physical noise and loudness through words such as galdr (‘magic song, charm’) and gný (‘clash, din’), but it also possible for the listener to actually ‘hear’ the sound of battle beginning behind them. The guttural ‘g’ sounds such as galdra and gnápsólar Gripnis and glottal-fricative ‘h’ noise such as Hilmir and hiði means that the poem initially sounds like a low grumbling at the back of the throat, like the soft rumbling amongst the troops in the build up to battle. As the poem builds up to the climax of battle in verse 7, so too does the soundscape reach a roaring crescendo:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Riks, þreifsk reiddra ðxa} \\
\text{rymr, knöttu spjør gylmja,} \\
\text{svartskyggð bitu seggi} \\
\text{sverð þjóðkonungs ferðar,} \\
\text{þás, hugfylldra hölða} \\
\text{hlaut andskoti Gauta} \\
\text{hór vas þongr of svírum,} \\
\text{sigr, flugbeiddra vigra.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(‘The roar of the swung axes of the mighty king’s army swelled; black-polished swords bit men; spears resounded when the song of flight-driven spears was loud over the necks of courageous men; the adversary of the Gautar [Haraldr] gained victory.’)

\[614\] Glýmrápa (trans. Marold, p. 76).
\[615\] Glýmrápa (ed. Marold, p. 87).
\[616\] Glýmrápa (trans. Marold, p. 87).
In this strophe, it might be argued that it is possible to hear the cutting sounds of a battle in full swing within the sounds of the words. Syllables that contain the dental consonant ‘t’ and ‘ð’ produce sounds that are short and sharp when spoken aloud, possibly intended by the poet to echo the clipped sound metal cutting down on metal, such as in svartskyggð bi tu seggi sverð and hlaut andskoti Gauta. In addition, the harsh rolled ‘r’ sound stressed at the start of the word in Ríks, þreifsk reiddra ðøxa rymr trills in the air when spoken aloud and may have also been intended by the poet to amplify the angry, noisy acoustic experience of weapons and warriors in battle. In some of his stanzas such as strophe 8, Þorbjörn also employs an extra half-rhyme:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Menfergir bar margar} \\
\text{margsapkra} — \text{Niðar varga} \\
\text{lundr vann sókn á sandi} — \\
\text{sandmens í bý randir,} \\
\text{áðr fyr eljunfróðum} \\
\text{allr herr Skota þverri} \\
\text{lögðis seið af láði} \\
\text{læbrautar varð floæja.}^{617}
\end{align*}
\]

(‘The very wise ring-destroyer [> generous man > Haraldr] bore many shields into the settlement by the shore-ring [> sea]; the tree of the wolves of Nidelven [> ships > seafarer > Haraldr] made an attack upon the shore before all the host had to flee from the incantation of the sword [>battle] out of the land of the pollack-path [> sea > island] before the mettle-wise destroyer of Scots [> Haraldr].’)\(^{618}\)

In this strophe, the final word in a skothent line is often mirrored in the first word of the following aðalhent line, for example: margr / margspakr (1, 2) sandi / sandmens (3, 4) and almost láði / læbrautar (5, 6) to create an extra ‘echoing’ noise. There is little question that this was a decision based on rhythmic and musical sound qualities rather than visually aesthetic qualities. In live performance, the acoustic effect of this double-echoing rhyme

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may have been aesthetically pleasing to the audience’s ear, but it may also have been used to communicate – aurally – the echoing sounds of battle.

Although the skáld of Glýmdrápa employs a few mythological references, for example dyn Skǫglar (‘the noise of Skǫgl [> valkyrie > battle’]) in strophe 5, religious ritual, spiritual efficacy and supernatural experience during the live ‘event’ seems to have been less at the heart of this performance poem than it is in the shield poems. By creating a live soundscape that filled up a room and enveloped the listening, watching audience in the sounds of cries, screams, cuts and blows from the battle-field along with the flood of visual images, the performer would have engaged his Norwegian court audience in what might be seen as the communal experience of ‘play’ in which they are transported to a different space. It seems reasonable to suggest that in a dark, smoky hall the audience could close their eyes, but they could not close their ears: the sound of battle surrounded them, forcing them to relive Haraldr’s glory and become part of the combat once more. At the heart of Þorbjǫrn’s performance of Glýmdrápa is essentially the experience of musical ‘sound-play’ and acoustic entertainment, rather than ritualistic even though it still employs the language of Óðinn and thereby induces a ‘higher’ space. All the same, in terms of both structural and mythological complexity, the poem’s syntax and kenning constructions are relatively straightforward: unlike the later poems presented at Jarl Hákon’s court (see below, Chapter 4.4) very little understanding of religion or mythology would have been needed to appreciate this vibrant acoustic performance.

The apparently ninth-century skaldic praise poem Ynglingatal would have offered its listening audience a similar vibrant acoustic experience. Supposedly composed by Þjóðólfrr of Hvin, for the petty King Rǫgnvaldr heiðumhár (‘high with honours’), the poem Ynglingatal lists twenty-six generations of Swedish and Norwegian rulers from Fjǫlnir to Óláfr Geirstaðaálfrr, describing their colourful deaths and, in some cases, their burial places.619 The poem itself is preserved in the prose (or prosimetric) context of Ynglinga saga (the first part of Snorri’s larger work known as Heimskringla), in which the poem’s function, according to Edith Marold, is to ‘illustrate and authenticate the prose narrative.’620 The title of the poem, Ynglingatal, is a title that appears in several medieval works, including the prologue to

619 For further discussion of both the poem Ynglingatal and the poet Þjóðólfrr of Hvin, see: ‘Þjóðólfrr ór Hvini’, ed. E. Marold in Poetry in Kings Sagas, p. 3-8.
620 Strophe 26 is also in Óláfs þáttr Geirstaðaálfss, whilst the whole poem is also copied (without prose) in a text copied from the lost Kringla manuscript. See: Ynglingatal (ed. Marold, pp. 3-8).
Heimskringla, in Ynglingasaga, Óláfs þáttir Geirstaðaálfs and Skáldatal.\textsuperscript{621} As with the other ninth-century skaldic poems considered above, the analysis of Ynglingatal is often fraught with difficulties, and it has been subject to extensive scholarly debate and research.\textsuperscript{622} Given that the poem lacks a formal introduction or call to attention ( unlike Eyvindr’s poem Háleygjatal which is thought to be modelled on Ynglingatal), and that the final strophe breaks off mid-sentence, scholars have debated how much of the original poem has been ‘lost’ to modern readers, which naturally has implications for our understanding of the poem as either a whole or fragmentary piece.\textsuperscript{623} Scholars have also queried whether the poem was even composed for King Rǫgnvaldr as praise, given the unheroic nature of kings’ deaths. In her discussion of the poem, Marold refers to Lönnroth’s suggestion (1986) that the tone of Ynglingatal is more akin to the satirical genre of senna (‘verbal duel’) or nið (‘slander’) as it essentially makes fun of the Ynglingar, rather than praising them, although she herself suggests that the poem is typical of legendary king poetry.\textsuperscript{624}

The dating of Ynglingatal has similarly not been without its difficulties and disagreements. Although the poem is traditionally dated to the late-ninth century, it has also been dated to the tenth-century and recently to the twelfth-century, which again has important implications for our understanding of the poem as a ‘pagan’ composition or medieval penned work and the nature of how the poem functioned in performance.\textsuperscript{625} Nevertheless, it seems likely that the ‘pagan’ connections underlining this poem would have had an important currency and function in a pre-Christian court setting, and thus it seems reasonable to regard the poem as a pre-Christian composition. In Ynglingatal, for example, the dynasty of Ynglingar are connected with the god Freyr. By connecting King Rǫgnvaldr, who may have been present during at least one of the poem’s earliest performances, with the semi-mythical Ynglingar dynasty and the pagan god Freyr, the poet Þjóðolfr not only legitimises Rǫgnvaldr’s rule in front of a live audience, but also elevates him to semi-

\textsuperscript{621} Ynglingatal (ed. Marold, p. 3).
\textsuperscript{623} Ynglingatal (ed. Marold, p. 5).
\textsuperscript{624} Ynglingatal (ed. Marold, p. 8).
\textsuperscript{625} Marold notes the different dates suggested by scholars for the poem Ynglingatal, namely Finnur Jónsson (1895) who dated the poem to the late-ninth century, Bugge who dated the poem to the tenth-century and more recently Kragg (2009) who dated the poem to the twelfth-century (Krag, 2009). See: Ynglingatal (ed. Marold, pp. 5-6).
supernatural or divinely-sanctioned status. In a sense, the poet gives the king both historical depth as well as sense of semi-divine, otherworldliness, blurring the boundaries between king and gods.

From a Performance Studies perspective, however, what is most interesting about the poem *Ynglingatal* is arguably not its mytho-political meaning, but its audible musicality, which once again argues for its link with oral performance and the oral tradition rather than writing. Unlike Þjóðolfr’s shield-poem *Haustlöng*, however, *Ynglingatal* does not employ regular *dróttkvætt* metre. Instead, Þjóðolfr employs a metre known as *kviðuháttr*, a metre thought to have derived from the eddic metre *fornyrðislag* but which distinguishes itself by employing only three syllables in odd lines. In *kviðuháttr*, word order is relatively straightforward and more often than not each line reads as a single unit, creating a steady rhythmic beat. As such, when read aloud the poem sounds relatively soft and light, with clean evenly-spaced sounds that do not feel rushed or dense, quite unlike *dróttkvætt* which can often feel heavy and impenetrable. In fact, the poem *Ynglingatal* has a distinctly musical quality to it, similar to the musicality that Terry Gunnell argues can be heard in the eddic poem *Völuspá*, as can be heard in strophe 1.⁶²⁶

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Varð framgengt} \\
\text{þars Fróði bjó} \\
\text{feigðarorð,} \\
\text{es at Fjǫlni kom.} \\
\text{Ok sikling} \\
\text{svigðis geira} \\
\text{vágr vindlauss} \\
\text{of viða skyldi.}\quad ⑥²⁷
\end{align*}
\]

(‘The word of doom that fell upon Fjǫlnir was fulfilled where Fróði lived. And the windless wave of the spears of the bull [> horns > beer] was to destroy the prince.’)⁶²⁸

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⁶²⁶ Gunnell, ‘The Belief Contexts and Performance of *Völuspá*.’

⁶²⁷ *Ynglingatal* (ed. Marold, p. 9).

The soft, round-vowelled assonance in the opening lines such as varð and pars, Fróði and bjó means that the strophe begins almost as a hushed, breathless whisper that slowly unfolds into the more cutting consonantal sounds ‘k’ and ‘g’ such as sölking and svigis, geira and skyldi, which again parallel the music that Gunnell notes exists in Völuspá and can almost be said to reflect the wave of beer described in the strophe. As such, the sounds mirror the action that Þjóðolfr describes: after he softly murmurs the spoken word of doom, harsh death follows. Such contrasting of sounds seems to be an important part of Þjóðolfr’s composition. In strophe 7, for example, he begins with soft ‘l’ sounds:

Varð Jǫrundr,
hinns endr of dó,
lifs of lattr
i Limafírði,
þás hábrjóstr
hǫrva Sleipnir
bana Goðlaugs
of bera skyldi.
Ok Hagbarðs
hersa valdi
hǫðnu leif
at halsi gekk.  

(‘Jǫrundr, the one who died long ago, was deprived of his life in Limfjorden when the high-breasted Sleipnir <horse> of flax cords [> gallows] had to carry the slayer of Guðlaugr [> Jǫrundr]. And the remnant of the kid [> leather strap] of Hagbarðr [> Danish legendary hero] [> noose] went around the neck of the lord of hersar [> king].’)  

629 Ynglingatal (trans. Marold, p. 28).
630 Ynglingatal (ed. Marold, p. 28).
The simple, cleanly separated and softly cut ‘l’ sounds of lífs, láttr and Limafirí contrast starkly to the constricted guttural-fricative ‘h’ and glottal ‘g’ sounds at the back of one’s throat in Hagbarð, hersa, hoðnu and halsi gekk, the latter of which might reflect the experience of the noose tightening itself around the doomed king. As with the previous strophe, the choice of sounds here seems designed to be heard, and possibly backed up with physical gesture.

In another example, it is possible to hear the sound of fire spreading, as another king dies in a fire:

\[
\begin{align*}
Ok \text{ Ingjald} \\
ifjørvan \text{ trað} \\
reyks \text{ rausuðr} \\
á \text{ Ræningi,} \\
þás \text{ húþjófr} \\
hyrjar \text{ leistum} \\
goðkynning \\
i \text{ gógnum steig.} \\
Ok \text{ sá yrðr} \\
allri \text{ þjóðu} \\
sanngróvarastr \\
með \text{ Svium þótti,} \\
es \text{ hann sjálfr} \\
sínu \text{ fjórvi} \\
fræknu \text{ fyrstr} \\
of \text{ fara vildi.}^{631}
\end{align*}
\]

(‘And the gusher of smoke [> fire] overcame Ingjaldr alive in Ræningr when the house-thief [> fire] strode with soles of fire through the descendant of gods. And among the Swedes that fate seemed the most just to all people that he himself should be the first, valiantly, to end his life.’)\(^{632}\)

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\(^{631}\) \textit{Ynglingatal} (ed. Marold, p. 44).
\(^{632}\) \textit{Ynglingatal} (trans. Marold, p. 44).
Whilst the resounding ‘r’ and hissing of ‘s’ sounds in reyks, rausuðr and Ræningi evoke the soft sounds of fire stealthily rushing around the king, the harsh ‘f’ fricatives in fjǫrvi, fræknu, fystr, fara and vildi almost punch the listener in the ear with their thumping, crackling quality as the king dies, thereby aurally evoking and echoing the visual images that the performer describes.

The function and effect of Ynglingatal’s interesting, juxtaposed soundscapes upon the listening audience would have gone beyond simply ear-catching metrics. Due to Þjóðolfur’s compositional choice of kvíðuháttr, the poem’s laconic yet leisurely unfolding pace would have given the listener an impression of the building up of layers of visual imagery and sound, almost like the building up of a grave-mound. Given the skaldic conception of poetry as a concrete acoustic object that was ‘built up’ on stuðlar or ‘props’ (see Chapter 2.7), it is possible to argue that just as Þjóðolfur starts his poem in the ancient past by tallying up Ynglignar descendants and moving further into the future, he also builds up acoustic layers by layering sound upon sound. In doing so, his poem becomes a musical object built up of both sound as much as it contains genealogical information to be handed over (and even learned) for the judgement of the king and his court. Essentially, it appears that Þorbjǫrn builds a platform beneath King Rǫgnvaldr: he weaves genealogical roles for the king in front of all those present, whilst also underlining that this entire line of Ynglingar kings are interwoven with a higher, semi-divine purpose as both descendants and sacrificial victims of the gods.

In fact, by delivering or ‘handing over’ this genealogical information in performance, the performer in Ynglingatal would have been somewhat reminiscent of a völva-like figure. Just like the all-knowing völva in the eddic poem Völuspá or the cave-giantess Hyndla in Hyndluljóð, the skáld passed on his knowledge of royal ancestry and divine lineage. Furthermore, the skáld describes the semi-sacrificial deaths of each king in relative detail. In doing so, the skáld underlines his personal connection to the arcane (i.e. knowledge of ancient kings’ deaths) whilst simultaneously linking the king and his descendants more closely to the otherworld. In the audience’s eyes the skaldic performer would thus have arguably assumed additional semi-supernatural status which extended beyond his already mystical status as a skáld (see Chapter 3), by explicitly linking himself with death, the otherworld, and ancient knowledge. For the watching audience, whether they included the king or his followers, this powerful skaldic performer and his musical, lively acoustic
utterance would have once again arguably invoked a liminal zone in the hall, a semi-sacred space in which the otherworld and ancient past were brought into some form of contact with the audience.

Unlike the ekphrastic shield poems or Þorbjǫrn hornklofi’s playful semi-dramatic sound-poems in which the skáld seems to have essentially aimed to entertain and showcase his skill, it is possible to argue that Þjóðolfr’s Ynglingatal goes further in that it depicts skaldic composition and performance in which sound is now clearly being used for semi-ritual purposes. Rather than simply reciting his patron’s ancestry and legitimising Norwegian rule, it appears that Ynglingatal, like many of the eddic poems, made use of a deliberately musical element in which juxtaposing sounds would have been made use of during performance which to add an extra acoustic layer to the poet’s visual images and evocation of a ‘sacred time’ in which the gods, the supernatural and the kings’ forefathers were all connected. During performance, it thus appears that the skáld would have used sound and image able to bring the listening audience into closer contact with the dead ancestors, in a similar way to what Terry Gunnell has argued occurs in the semi-ritualistic works of Eiríksmál and Hákonarmál, in which the dead kings are visibly taken into Valhǫll. In doing so, the performer of Ynglingatal would have brought his audience face to face with their ruler’s semi-supernatural qualities at the same time as he confronted them with the unsettling truth of the king’s own mortality.

In short, unlike the shield poems in which the skáld took on the role of skaldic storyteller, it seems that the three early poems Hrafnsmál (Haraldskvæði), Glýmdrápa and Ynglingatal should be considered first and foremost as ‘sound poems’ in which sound and image work together to evoke an experience rather than as works aiming to present a coherent narrative. Although the poems are very different from one another in terms of in their actual function, performance modes, and meaning (varying from semi-dramatic dialogue to abstract musical-like verse), all three seemed to have been composed with a listening, and presumably watching, audience in mind. In fact, both skálds seem to have delighted in composing for their audience’s ear (rather than their intellect) and in creating vivid acoustic soundscapes in order to create a sense of ritual, play or a blurring of the two.

4.4. Poetry and Propaganda: Skaldic ‘Slam’ in the Court of Jarl Håkon

By the time of Jarl Håkon’s reign towards the end of the tenth-century (c. 970-995 AD) it appears that skaldic court poetry had changed in both nature and purpose from being ritually-charged initiation verses, mythological evocations, acoustic sound poems and storytelling entertainment to being politically charged poetic propaganda. As Folke Ström has convincingly argued, the outburst of poetic activity circulated by Håkon’s entourage of court skálds suggests that in late tenth-century Norway, skaldic poetry seems to have taken on a new, clear political and ideological agenda. Ström argues that Håkon’s entourage of skálds were seen as being ideologically significant as they effectively functioned as broadcasters who publicised the jarl’s political messages via poetry and public performance. Ström also claims that: ‘the skálds were united with the jarl in their common interest in the ancestral religion, from whose hoard of myths they drew their inspiration.’

Although Ström perhaps over-emphasises or makes too bold an assumption regarding the actual ‘religious’ belief skálds had in pre-Christian mythology, the importance of Old Norse mythology in the poetry connected with Håkon’s court cannot be overstated. Indeed, it appears that the manipulation of myth by Håkon’s skálds such as Eyvindr skáldaspillir, Einarr skálaglamm, Halfreð Óttarson and Þóreliðr järanskáld to name just a few was fundamental in establishing and maintaining his rulership and ideology. In short, Håkon was a ruler who was well aware of the performative powers of the media. In recent scholarship, both Gro Steinsland and Jens Peter Schjødt have explored this intrinsic relationship between power and religion, and connected both with ruler ideology. Steinsland even argues that: ‘[ideology also refers to] the intentional use of myths, rites or narratives by individual groups to legitimise a certain type of rulership.’ Like Steinsland, Schjødt also argues that myths, such

636 Ström argues, for example, that: ‘It is indeed a well-documented fact that the skalds of the missionary period, with isolated exceptions, had their heart in heathenism.’ Whilst such an assertion may seem more than a little bold, especially as we are dealing with a complex period of syncretism and conversion in the ninth- and tenth-centuries of which much is unknown, it seems reasonable to argue that Ström’s comment may be modified slightly. Since skálds were composing poetry full of ‘pagan’ myths and allusions which include suggestions of their king entering Valhöll as a guest of Óðinn, it seems reasonable to suggest that they were not (at least outwardly) staunch Christians. Indeed, their poetic craft was thought to have come straight from the supernatural realm as a gift of Óðinn. Whether such ‘pagan’ poetry was the result of personal, private belief on behalf of the skáld, part of the skaldic tradition or merely part of Håkon’s political power-play is, of course, an interesting question. For further discussion, see: Ström, ‘Poetry as Propaganda’, p. 440.
as those often referred to in skaldic poems, express or ‘literally verbalise’ a culture or society’s ideology. As demonstrated below, by manipulating the presentation and utilisation of myth Jarl Hákon’s poets were able to promulgate or consolidate a new ideology for the Norwegian pro-pagan ruler. All of this once again focussed on the physical performance in space.

Eyvindr skáldaspillir Helgason’s poem Háleygjatal is a good starting point to demonstrate exactly how poetic performance could be used to politicise myth and reinforce a king’s rulership by giving the latter mythological validation. Several manuscripts and medieval works ascribe thirteen strophes of the (arguably incomplete) poem Háleygjatal to the tenth-century poet Eyvindr. These preserved in Heimskringla, Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar, Fagrskinna, and Snorra Edda. With its kviðuháttr metrical structure and enumeration of twenty-seven generations of staunchly pagan Hlaðir jarls, it seems almost certain that Eyvindr (whose nickname skáldaspillir arguably means ‘plagiarist’) modelled Háleygjatal on the earlier poem Ynglingatal (see Chapter 4.3). The main theme of Eyvindr’s poem is, as Ström demonstrates, divine ancestory, as Eyvindr links the jarls of Hlaðir – and thus Hákon – to Óðinn by naming the god as the jarls’ progenitor. As Ström notes, the message of Eyvindr’s poem is the jarl’s right to rulership, the erotic metaphor of land being used to reinforce this image and legitimise Hákon’s authority over it. This is clear, for example, in strophe 12.

\[
\text{Þeims allt austr} \\
\text{til Egða býs} \\
\text{brúðr valtýs}
\]

640 For a full list describing which verses are preserved in which manuscripts, see: Háleygjatal (ed Poole, pp. 193-195).
und boegi liggr.\textsuperscript{643}

(‘Under whose arm (the bride (of the slaughter-god)) \( > \) Öðinn \( > \) Jǫrð \( > \) ‘land’) lies all the way east to the territory of the Egðir.’)\textsuperscript{644}

Here, the ruler Hákon is depicted in the role of the mythological god Öðinn, ‘conquering’ the Norwegian landscape just as Öðinn succeeded in his sexual conquest of the mythological jǫtunn woman and personification of the land, as described in \textit{Gylfaginning}: the mythological-political parallels here could not be clearer.\textsuperscript{645} In Eyvindr’s bid to reinforce Hákon’s rulership ideology by connecting him to Öðinn, and perhaps also simultaneously emphasising the poet’s own closeness to Öðinn, Eyvindr stresses the link between Öðinn, poetry and the jarl’s ancestry which is immediately established in the opening lines of strophe 1, and underlines his personal involvement and connection with the world of myth:

\begin{verbatim}
Viljak hljóð
at Hôars líði,
meðan Gillings
gjöldum yppik,
meðan hans ætt
i hverlegi
galga farms
til goða teljum,
hinn es Surts
ór søkkðolum
farmognuðr
fjúgandi bar.\textsuperscript{646}
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{643} Háleygjatal (ed. Poole, p. 211).
\textsuperscript{644} Háleygjatal (trans. Poole, p. 212).
\textsuperscript{645} In \textit{Gylfaginning}, Jǫrð is described as the earth as well as both wife and daughter of Öðinn, and mother of Þórr. See: \textit{Edda: Snorri Sturluson} (trans. Faulkes, p. 13).
\textsuperscript{646} Háleygjatal (ed. Poole, p. 197).
(‘I would wish for a hearing for the drink of Hôarr <= Óðinn> [> poetry], while I lift up the payment for Gillingr <giant> [> poetry], while we [I] reckon his lineage back to the gods in the cauldron-liquid [DRINK] of the burden of the gallows [> Óðinn > poetry], that which the travel-furtherer [> Óðinn] carried flying from the treasure-valleys of Surtr [giant].’)

In live performance, however, the skáld’s delivery would have gone beyond that of merely articulating a verbal text laced with political propaganda. Like any performer who wishes to engage and maintain his audience’s attention, it seems likely that the performer would have made use of gesture and body language, as well as tone, volume and eye contact among other things. The verb yppa (‘to lift, raise up’) in the phrase meðan Gillings / gjoldum yppik (‘while I lift up the payment for Gillingr [> giant > poetry]’), for example, offers an immediate possible clue to the performer’s use of movement, such as raising his arms. As with the poets discussed above in Chapters 4.2 and 4.3, the poet’s call to attention at the beginning of his performance would have immediately changed the dynamic of the room by not only opening the performance space and invoking the social ritual of performer-audience (that is, the poet-king and poet-court relationship) relationship, but by also bringing in an element of the supernatural. As noted earlier, the live aural sound of skaldic verse would arguably have had a supernatural significance for the listening audience (especially one who ‘believed’ in the old gods), who may have associated the rhythmic, cryptic verse with the language of Óðinn. Merely uttering the name ‘Óðinn’ or a heiti for Óðinn would arguably have had an invocatory power, in a sense calling the gods into the liminal performance space.

In addition to the sound of skaldic verse, however, the physical presence of the performer would have arguably augmented the semi-supernatural elements of the poet’s performance for the audience. The skáld was considered a marginal, itinerant figure who had come into the hall and its society from outside (see Chapters 3.6-3.7), so it seems reasonable to suggest that the audience would have seen parallels with Óðinn, who was also

647 Háleygjatal (trans. Poole, p. 197).
648 At the same time, the idea of ‘lifting’ praise also harks back to the skaldic concept of poetry as a concrete, moving object that is launched uwards and forwards during recitation, before travelling towards the audience’s eyes and ears. See Chapter 2.7.
649 See Chapter 2.7.
650 Ong, Orality and Literacy, pp. 32-4. Terry Gunnell also discussed the idea of name magic in his lecture ‘On the Dating and Nature of “Eddic Poetry”.'
considered as a rhyme-speaking traveller (see Chapter 2). As noted earlier, it seems that *skálds* themselves played on this idea. Considering the heady alcohol-fuelled atmosphere, it seems reasonable to suggest that the *skáld*’s language, invocations and mythological references would have meant that the ‘here and now’ would have taken on new meaning for the audience who, just like modern theatre-goers or spectators at a slam contest, would get swept up in the atmosphere and action of the performance. Performing *Háleygjatal* live in front of Hákon’s court or followers, therefore, would probably have meant that the *skáld*’s words actually went beyond politicised myth. Taking on the double-role of both poet-performer and itinerant Odinnic speaker, the *skáld* would have not only have opened up doors between two worlds, but also have served as a channel between them, by simultaneously invoking both sacred space and sacred time (as for example occurs in Christian Mass). In live performance, Eyvindr’s poem would thus have involved a complex interplay between social ritual (praising king), political ideology (broadcasting propaganda) and semi-sacred ritual (invoking gods). This demonstrates that, unlike Þorbjörn *hornklofi*’s earlier *Glýmdrápa* and *Haraldskvæði*, Eyvindr’s performance was not simply meant to function as acoustic entertainment: like the performance of *Ynglingatal*, this poem aimed at generating a semi-supernatural, politically-charged audience experience.

In terms of live performance, a number of Hákon’s other *skálds* also show awareness of the potential of playing off their audience’s experience, as the performing poet transforms the jarl’s followers, their space, and their evening of merriment into something above and beyond the ‘ordinary’, whilst simultaneously . In Einarr *skálaglamm*’s poem *Vellekla* (‘lack of gold’), for example, the main theme is, as Ström once again notes, god-inspired leadership. Like so many other early skaldic poems, *Vellekla* is not preserved as a ‘complete’ poem but instead consists of thirty-seven strophes scattered throughout a variety of manuscripts and texts, including *Heimskringla*, *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta*, *Fagrskinna* and *Snorra Edda*. The poem recounts Hákon’s various military and political dealings such as his conflicts with the sons of Eiríkr Blóðøx, his accession to power (as jarl)

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under the Danish king Haraldr blátønn, his promotion of paganism and a return to peace, the battle against the Jómsvíkingar and several other conflicts. Ström argues, however, that the poem’s main message is that under Hákon’s leadership, prosperity and peace returned to the land due to the gods’ favour. As in many praise poems, Einarr starts the poem with a call for attention in strophe 1 which asks that the audience listen to his poem, at the same time underlining the mythological roots of his words, stressing his semi-supernatural credentials:

Hugstóran biðk heyra
— heyr, jarl, Kvasis dreyra –
Foldar vorð á fyrða
Fjørðleggjar brim dreggjar.655

(‘I bid the high-minded guardian of the land [> ruler > Hákon] listen to the surf of the dregs of men of the fjord-bone [> rock > dwarfs > poem]; hear, jarl, the blood of Kvasir [> poem].’)

It is clear from this poetic upphaf that, like the other skaldic poems already examined, Einarr did not intend this poem to be read silently on the page: he intended to speak it aloud, and for it to be broadcast publicly for those present to hear. There is thus again little question that Einarr was probably as concerned about the acoustic effect of his poem as much as he was about its political message; for it to have received attention and be remembered, after all, it needed to have been of high-artistic value that held the audience’s interest. In stanza (3), after Einarr has ensured the attention of his audience, there is some evidence that he, like earlier skálds, is paying special attention to sound:

Eisar vágr fyr vísa
(verk) Rœgnis (mér hagna);
þýtr Óðroerís alda
ôldrhafs við fles galdra.657

---

(‘The wave of Rognir [> Óðinn > poem] roars before the ruler; the works are successful for me; the wave of the ale-sea of Öðroerir [> mythical vat > poem] poems against the skerry of incantations [> teeth].’)^658

Here, like Þorbjǫrn in Glýmdrápa and Bjóðólf in Ynglingatal, deliberate sonic features can be heard. Einarr effectively brings the sounds of the sea to life through hissing sibilance and an almost rocking-rhythm. The ‘s’ sounds in Eisa and viða, in addition to the breathless whispering sound following the consonant ‘r’ in Eisa, vägr and fyr sounds like the roaring ocean, whilst the pounding rhythm of dróttkvætt combines with this sound to acoustically create the swaying motion of the sea. The round-vowel rhyme of alda and galdra also has a deliberately echoing effect like the roaring of waves resonating in the poet’s mouth. Whilst Einarr was clearly thinking about the artistic, entertainment value of his poem in performance, like any poet composing in a competitive environment he was also conscious of his simultaneously weak and strong position within the social ritual of live recitation in the hall amongst his peers. Whilst Einarr, like his fellow poets, had allegedly drunk Óðinn’s gift of poetry, which came directly from the god himself, and had the power to make or break his patron’s reputation, he also had to face the fact that false praise could cost him his head. This personal awareness can perhaps be encoded in the fact that he was competing with other skálds for courtly favour, who had also boasted of their Odinnic associations. In strophe 5, for example, he utters:

\[
\text{Hljóta munk, né hlítik,} \\
\text{hertýs, of þat frýju,} \\
\text{fyr þrpeysi at ausa} \\
\text{austr vín-Gnóðar flausta.}^659
\]

(‘It will fall to me to bale out the bilge-water of the Gnóð [> ship] of the wine of the army god [> Óðinn > Poem > Vat > Poem] for the valiant racer of ships [> seafarer > Hákon]; I will not endure a reproach on account of it.’)^660

In short, in order to distinguish himself in performance while also succeeding in his job of promoting Hákon’s political ideology, Einarr would thus have been forced to combine artistic flair and poetic ingenuity with performative skill which would have meant playing off his surroundings. Ström argues that Einarr’s final strophe (37) borders on apotheosis, as can be heard here:

\[ \begin{align*} 
\text{Þvít fjölkostigr flestu} \\
\text{flestr ræðr við son Bestlu} \\
\text{— tekit hefk morðs til mærðar} — \\
\text{mæringr an þú færa.} 
\end{align*} \]

(‘For most many-virtued famous men control much less than you with the son of Bestla [> giantess > Óðinn]; I have begun the praise of battle.’)

Einarr’s Vellekla is clearly interlaced with more riddling kennings than much earlier court poetry, causing one to wonder exactly how much an average medieval audience or court would have understood with regards to the literal meaning of his words, as opposed to just hearing it as a material sound-object interlaced with various abstract images, like Glýmdrápa and even Ynglingatal. By the time Einarr reaches his final strophe (quoted above), the extra echoing rhyme (similar to Glýmdrápa) of flest / flestr (1, 2) and mærðar / -mæringr (3, 4) coupled with the almost fully end-rhymed flestu, Bestlu and mærðar, færa, make a climactic end to Vellekla that stresses the work is just as much about the sound of skaldic poetry as it was literal meaning. In live performance the pounding rhythm, strengthened by the additional echoing rhymes, and Odinnic language articulated by the skáld, with his semi-supernatural associations, would have arguably combined to create a heightened acoustic soundscape in the hall that was not only separated from ordinary speech, but bordered on the ritual invocation of higher supernatural powers. In Einarr’s skaldic ‘slam’ performance, it could be argued that the deliberate play on sound is deliberately placed on a par with the political messages about Hákon in the poem, resulting

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in poetic meaning once again extending beyond the literal text so that meaning becomes located in the oral ‘sounding’ of a poem itself.

In contrast to Háleygjatal and Vellekla, Eilífr goðrunarson’s notoriously complex poem Þórsdrápa does not appear to praise Jarl Hákon directly. Instead, Þórsdrápa takes the form of a mythological narrative which is more akin to eddic or shield poetry rather than ‘conventional’ skaldic praise. Like the earlier ‘skaldic storytellers’ Bragi Boddason, Þjóðolfr of Hvin and Úlfur Uggason (see Chapter 4.2), Eilífr narrates Þórr’s journey to retrieve his hammer, which has been stolen by the jötunn Geirrøðr, among other things narrating Þórr’s crossing of the aggressive river Vímur and fight against Geirrøðr in his cave. Given the poem’s wholly-mythological subject matter, at first glance Eilífr’s Þórsdrápa appears to have very little to do with the promotion of Jarl Hákon’s royal propaganda at all, suggesting it should arguably be classed with the earlier narrative shield poems. Nevertheless, the poem was supposedly composed for Jarl Hákon in an environment where several other skálds were similarly composing — and competing with — political praise poetry, so this makes the unusual poem even more interesting to analyse as part of Hákon’s ‘canon’. In fact, Margaret Clunies Ross and Roberta Frank have both suggested that Eilífr’s expertly crafted and highly cryptic poem also contains considerable political overtones. Clunies Ross, for example, argues that the heiti for giantess (Feðja and Mǫrn) that Eilífr uses are both Norwegian river names which thereby located Geirrøðr’s supernatural troops in the ‘real’ world of tenth-century Norway. Similarly, Frank notes that the poet uses the term Rygir (‘Rogalanders’), which she argues refers to the southern rivals of Jarl Hákon and his northern (Hlaðir) ancestors and, more importantly, foes that Hákon had succeeded in defeating. As such, Frank suggests that Eilífr was directly comparing Jarl Hákon to the god Þórr and is stressing that, just like Þórr hammered his opponents, Hákon made sure that he defended his land and crushed his enemies. Frank argues that a listening audience would have been aware of such parallels.

664 For further studies that discuss Eilífr and his poem Þórsdrápa, see: Guðmundr Ingi Markússon, ‘Þórsdrápa and the “Sif’s Hair” episode in Skáldskaparmál as Transformations: an Interpretive Experiment in Old Norse Mythology’, Arkiv för Nordic Filologi 120 (2005), 149-79; Clunies Ross, ‘An Interpretation of Þórr’s Encounter with Geirrøðr and his Daughters’, pp. 370-91; Motz, L., ‘Þórr’s River Crossing’, Saga Book 23.6 (1993), 469-87; and see: Poetry From the Kings’ Sagas I: From Mythical Times to c. 1035, ed. D. Whaley.

665 Note that Margaret Clunies Ross has argued that Þórr does not retrieve but wins his hammer. See: Clunies Ross, ‘An Interpretation of the Myth of Þórr’s Encounter with Geirrøðr and his Daughter’, pp. 370-81.


Given the complexity of Eilífr’s dróttkvætt, however, it is again questionable how much of the narrative or verbal text a listening audience would have immediately understood. Unlike the relatively straight-forward syntax of earlier poems such as Ynglingatal and Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál), Eilífr encrypted his narrative in layers of deliberately confused and inconsistent kennings. In fact, as Roberta Frank argues, ‘Eilífr seems to have gone out of his way to frustrate narrative expectation.’ Such excessive, deliberate concealment of literal meaning suggests that Eilífr neither hoped nor expected his audience to understand the ‘meaning’ of his poem during their first encounter with it in live performance. As such, it seems reasonable to consider whether there were other extralexical aspects involved in driving Eilífr’s composition and performance of Þórsdrápa that would have gained and maintained the audience’s interest, such as the audience’s experience of the poem as vibrant sound in space. As with Eyvindr skáldaspillir and Einarr skálaglamm, it seems that Eilífr was highly aware of the acoustic impact a poem could have upon its listeners. In strophe 5, for example, Eilífr brings to life the sounds of the water that Þórr is travelling through on his way to Geirrøðr’s cave:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{mjȫk leið ör stað støkkvir} \\
\text{stiklẽd̃ar veg breĩðan} \\
\text{urðar þrjóts þar er eitri} \\
\text{æstr þjoðár fnæstu.}\end{align*}
\]

(‘the furious scatterer of the scree-villain [Þórr] made fast progress over the broad way of the stick-path [ocean], where mighty streams spewed poison.’)

If spoken aloud, one might argue that the combination of sibilant ‘s’ sounds and harsh dental fricative ‘þ-j’ in words such as støkkvir, stiklẽdar, þrjóts and þjóðar in addition to the ‘t’ sounds in eitri and æstr, seem to reflect the splashing waves described by Eilífr followed by the spluttering performer’s mouth as he spits out the words æstr and fnæstu like the spitting of poison. In the second helmingar of strophe 6, however, one seems to hear a whole cacophony of different sounds:

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669 Skáldskaparmál (ed. Faulkes, pp. 26-7, verse 77). Þórsdrápa, like the three shield poems Ragnarsdrápa, Haustlǫng and Húsdrápa (above) is only preserved in Skáldskaparmál.
Knátti, hreggi hǫggvin,
hýmbél við mol glymja,
en fellihryn fjalla
Feðju þaut með steðja.\textsuperscript{671}

(‘the banging files [>] spears] jangled against the pebbles, while the mountains’
falling-roar [>] cascade] rushed, beaten by an ice-storm, along Feðja’s anvil [>] rock].\textsuperscript{672}

The pounding rhythm of the banging spears, storm and anvil are already reflected in the
poem’s steady \textit{dröttkvætt} rhythm, but here the pounding is amplified by thudding, heavy
consonantal sounds such as ‘k’ and g’ in knatti, hreggi, hǫggvin and glymja. Furthermore, it
is possible that in live performance the \textit{skáld} would have pronounced the phrase fellihryn
fjalla (‘falling noise of the mountain’) like a cascading, musical waterfall. By automatically
raising his voice for the high front vowels ‘e’ and ‘i’ (and also semi-vowel ‘y’) in fellihryn
whilst lowering his voice for the back-vowel ‘a’ in fjalla, the performer could have thus
relied on the flow of his voice and vocal sounds to mirror the movement of the musical
mountain.

In contrast to the sound of hissing rivers and sliding mountains in the strophes noted
above, elsewhere we find Eilífr using sound to bring to life the difficult physical challenges
that Þórr faced on his travels. In strophe 8, for example, Eilífr describes Þórr and his
companions crossing a body of water on their journey into \textit{Jǫtunheimr}:

\begin{quote}
Óðu fast (en) fríðir,
(flaut) eiðsvara Gauta
setrs vikingar snotrir,
(svarðrunnit fen) gunnar,\textsuperscript{673}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{671} \textit{Skáldskaparmál} (ed. Faulkes, p. 50, verse 154).
\textsuperscript{672} \textit{Edda} (trans. Faulkes, p. 84).
\textsuperscript{673} \textit{Skáldskaparmál} (ed. Faulkes, p. 27, verse 80).
\end{flushright}
In this strophe, the sound of Eilífr’s words are not smooth and flowing, but fragmented and stilted with audible pauses between a jerky delivery. The narrative aside en flaut svarðrunnit fen (‘the sward-flowing fen flowed’), for example, does not read as a smooth, uninterrupted phrase: the phrase is broken up and its individual words scattered patchily throughout the verse, like a series of jumbled up puzzle pieces. In live performance, the broken syntax would have thus served to jolt the listener’s ears and possibly reflected the tough resistance that Þórr and his mythological companions faced whilst battling his way through the hostile water.

In the competitive court environment of Jarl Hákon’s skaldic propaganda it appears that Eilífr, in a manner similar to the earlier skaldic storytellers (see Chapter 4.2), used interesting soundscapes to bring pagan narrative myth ‘to life.’ It seems, however, that Eilífr went beyond simple ‘storytelling’ by instead lacing his poem with political messages that were meant to play off the mythological knowledge of those in the hall who could understand him. In terms of Hákon’s poets, we might therefore think of Eilífr’s Þórsdrápa as representing the ‘ultimate’ skaldic performance. In this poem, self-image, myth, make-belief, storytelling, soundscapes, imagery and the supernatural fuse with political propaganda and royal ideology to immerse the listening audience in an all-encompassing skaldic ‘slam’ experience, an experience that would also have made use of the poet-performer’s vocal range, tone, body-language and gesture, facial expression and eye-contact.

674 Edda (trans. Faulkes, p. 84).
CONCLUSION

The above analysis points to a clear development having taken place in the way in which ninth- and tenth-century Scandinavian skálds composed and performed their poems. Whilst shield poets brought mythological scenes and narratives to life by stepping into the role of semi-supernatural storyteller (see Chapter 4.2), the sound poets worked more on creating acoustic sound-scapes that were full of musicality and abstract imagery (see Chapter 4.3). Despite their slightly different approaches, both types of performance would have offered their watching, listening audiences an all-encompassing, fully-emersing experience. Bringing the illusory world of the gods into contact with the present reality of the audience, it seems that these early skálds deliberately composed their poems with the intention of momentarilily engaging their audience in the liminal zone of make-belief and play. Of course, given the skálds’ supernatural associations and position almost as shamans speaking the language of Óðinn (see Chapter 3), there would have almost certainly also been an element of ritual underpinning these performances. In a pre-Christian environment where the old gods were very much alive, the impact of a dimly-lit smoky hall, crackling fire and mead-filled evening of merriment upon an audience listening to, watching and experiencing the dubious figure of the skáld, an outsider, stepping into the performance space and speaking in the musical, cryptic, godly-given verse would have had undoubtedly created a semi-ritualistic frame within which the audience could understand and interpret the words that they heard and the performance that they observed.

Nevertheless, it appears from the compositional choices that these storytelling skálds and sound poets made that such liminal, ritual experiences functioned only as part of their performance. Ultimately, at the heart of Þorðr’s talking raven and quizzical valkyrie, Þjóðolfr’s cacophony of musical sounds and Bragi’s conjuring up of blood-soaked halls and chopped limbs, was the idea of highly entertaining, engaging, memorable and playful performance. It is only in Jarl Hákon’s reign that skálds seemed to move towards more deliberately politically-charged performance. Of course, all skaldic praise poems have an element of propaganda as they offer inflated accounts of their patron’s generosity or heroic deeds. It is in Hákon’s reign, however, that performance and politics, myth and kingship
ideology fully merge as an effective form of propaganda. As courtly competition between skálds would have been fierce (Hákon had at least nine skálds composing for him, after all), it seems that skálds therefore needed new ways to engage, and maintain, their audience’s attention. Like modern slam poets today, poetry that was merely ‘pretty’ or playful was not nearly enough: this poetry needed to pack political, religious and ideological punches too, along with effective and original use of the poet’s performance skills.

Although the skálds discussed above appear to have approached their poems and poetic performances differently, one thing remains clear: all were composed with the intention of live performance. Composing without pen or paper, it is clear that skálds had no concept of poetry as black and white symbols on the printed page, which is the predominant form in which we as twenty-first century audiences now encounter these poems. Instead, as the above analysis hopefully demonstrates, skálds envisioned their poetry as concrete, moving sound objects that were built up from raw material (blood, honey, mead; timber, metal) into upright solid monuments to be launched towards the eyes and ears of their audience. Furthermore, it has hopefully become apparent that although only the skeletal written texts of skaldic performance remains (preserved in medieval manuscripts), it is no longer sufficient for scholars to simply ‘read’ these poems as silent, static literary-products of thirteenth-century Iceland. In fact, as modern poetry theory demonstrates, that the act of simply ‘reading’ these oral poems (without including live sound and physical space) is hugely detrimental to our understanding of how skaldic poetry worked, existed and was conceived. As sound is integral to a poem’s meaning (see Chapter 2), even if we can’t watch an original skaldic performance, then we as scholars can at least attempt to record these poems and listen to them (even if this is alongside printed editions), and consider them first and foremost from this viewpoint.

In short, although many innovative and insightful academic studies have been conducted into many aspects of skaldic verse in recent years, there is nonetheless still room to effectively incorporate the approaches of other disciplines into Old Norse academia (such as those of oral theory, Performance Studies, modern poetry theory). In addition, scholars should be encouraged to look beyond the book and start to engage with real performers and real performances in order to bring to light new perspectives and understandings of the skálds, their poems and their listening audiences. By conducting what Terry Gunnell calls performance archaeology and adopting a Performance Studies framework, modern
scholarship can begin to move away from text-bound understanding of skaldic verse and start analysing these poems as they were conceived of, experienced and understood by contemporary audiences: in other words, as living, breathing, all-encompassing performance.
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