Karen Swenson. *Performing Definitions: Two Genres of Insult in Old Norse Literature.* Studies in Scandinavian Literature and Culture, vol. 3. Columbia, South Carolina: Camden House, 1991. 162 pages.

The main thesis of this book is that the *senna* serves a defining, excluding function (the human, the heroic, the male versus the monstrous, the other, the female), the *mannjafnaðr* a comparing, hierarchizing function (within the bounds of the heroic and the male). A second thesis is that, in literary criticism as in folklore studies, indigenous ("ethnic") terms are to be preferred to external ("analytical") ones. Still another thesis, related to the second, is that the discussion of Old Germanic literary genres is more subjective than scholars have admitted and that it has itself taken the forms of *senna* and *mannjafnaðr.* The latter idea is proffered not merely as witticism but as serious characterization of scholarly debate; it is stated in the preface and returned to several times. The book closes with the wish for "a double perspective that admits the truths of both Helgi and Hrímgerðr" (111).

The work began as a seminar paper in 1984, was defended as a dissertation at Cornell University in 1987, "and the dissertation eventually developed into this study" (VII). Still, the reader cannot escape the conclusion that it was published prematurely. There are good ideas in the book, but they are not consistently supported by careful research and argument. In what follows, goal, method, research, documentation, and presentation are discussed in that order.

The basic structure of the book is clear and to the point: there is an introduction, a chapter (1) showing that scholarly genre classification has been subjective; a chapter (2) on the need to use "ethnic" terms; a chapter (3) on *mannjafnaðr;* a chapter (4) on *senna;* a chapter (5) in which the author applies her definitions at the level of the saga (*Ǫrvar-Odds saga*) and finds large-scale, abstract *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* structures; and a conclusion (chap. 6). But the difficulties begin already with the formulation of the problem. Swenson wants to define two "genres," *senna* and *mannjafnaðr.* But genres of what? The argumentation hops indiscriminately between two quite different planes: *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* as (reconstructed) cultural phenomena on the one hand, and *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* as "segments of texts," "structural," "compositional," or even "conceptual units" on the other. (See, for example, the argument in chapter 5.) Occasionally, the history of the "genres" seems also to be confused with the history of the words *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* themselves.

Swenson observes that dictionaries of Old Norse define the words *senna, mannjafnaðr, hvǫt, níð,* and *spá* "primarily as abstract nouns but also provide evidence suggesting that these terms may refer to structural units," i.e., that they are "ethnic genres" (28). But these words denoted first and foremost—as the dictionaries correctly tell us—particular discourse situations, whether in real life or in literature. Is there, in fact, any situation or act, verbal or otherwise, which cannot function as some kind of narrative unit? This is true not only of "speech-act" words like *ámæli, eggjan, flimtan, fortala, ginning, háð, hót, róg, spott,* or *tal,* but also of *mót, þing, koma, veizla, fǫr, reið, dráp, hólmganga, orrusta,* and so on. That poets or other speakers of Old Norse consciously used words like *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* in a metaliterary sense is, Swenson to the contrary, far from certain. Her redefining them in this way leads to tautologies like the following: "Because ethnic terms for structural units, terms such as *senna* and *mannjafnaðr,* refer to orally delivered speeches even when found within written texts, an analysis in these terms strengthens the suggestion that the poetics of the written texts we have reflects the poetics of earlier, oral literature" (85).

Swenson has borrowed the term ethnic poetics and the second thesis mentioned above from the folklorist Dan Ben-Amos, via Joseph Harris. (Incidentally, although Swenson uses the word "ethnic" in this special sense from the start of the book, its meaning remains obscure to the uninitiated reader until it is explained in the quotation from Ben-Amos on page 27.) In the article in which he presented Ben-Amos's idea to Old Norse scholars, Harris himself admitted that

ethnic poetics "cannot be adequately studied in the lexicon alone and, for a dead culture, can never be fully understood"; "the reconstructed ethnic view will always be incomplete and therefore (because the object of study is a system) also to some extent false" ("Genre in the Saga Literature: A Squib," *Scandinavian Studies* 47 [1975]: 431; quoted by Swenson on p. 23 and referred to again indirectly on p. 82). Marcel Bax and Tineke Padmos also had reservations: "It seems that the kind of analysis that Harris initiates is restricted to the abstract level of pragmatic universals. We agree with Harris that the study of verbal dueling in Old Icelandic should start with native categories, but in our opinion the question of generic features calls forth a detailed and more or less exhaustive analysis of the verbal actions that are performed in the course of a flyting" ("Two Types of Verbal Dueling in Old Icelandic: The Interactional Structure of the *senna* and the *mannjafnaðr* in *Hárbarðsljóð,*" *Scandinavian Studies* 55 [1983]: 149–50). These qualms do not seem to bother Swenson, who does not respond to them directly at all. (In fact, Bax and Padmos's article is mentioned in the book only once, in the list of "recent works" on *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* in 29 n. 31; nothing is said about its contents.) Towards the end of the book, however, she concedes that her definitions of *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* are really just as "analytic" as they are "ethnic," "though they do attempt to coincide with what can be known of the 'ethnic' categories denoted by these terms." Moreover, she says, genre definitions "are valid if they are accepted as true (useful) whether or not they are historically true" (82).

With respect to the role of formal analysis in genre definition, Swenson finds it "likely that the significant difference between two genres of verbal duels will not be a matter of pure form; that is, the presence or absence of an element such as 'The Threat' or 'The Insult' will not in itself justify drawing a generic boundary" (42). She prefers to look for a functional difference. This is an acceptable decision, though one may ask whether more sophisticated conclusions might not have been reached by paying more attention to form. In an article too recent to have been taken into account in Swenson's book, even Harris appears to second Bax and Padmos's idea that the study of dialogue "genres" of this type ought to begin at the level of individual verbal actions: "Generic history could begin here [at *hvǫt* or the Old English *beot*] with simple speech acts and pass through a stage of ordinary 'speech genres' and a further stage of privileged 'speech event'" ("Reflections on Genre and Intertextuality in Eddic Poetry with Special Reference to *Grottasǫngr,*" in *Poetry in the Scandinavian Middle Ages,* ed. Teresa Pàroli [Spoleto: Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo, 1990], 234).

A further problem is that, if one is going to speak of functional oppositions—and Swenson does indeed, with two pages of Saussure, Benveniste, and Lévi-Strauss as introduction—one must address the question whether *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* stand in opposition only to each other. Are these the only types of verbal dueling in Old Norse, or are there more? Swenson's answer is not clear. After presenting her definition of *mannjafnaðr,* she seems to assume there is only one genre left to discuss, which she concludes must be *senna:* "This definition of *mannjafnaðr* . . . may stand as the structural description of one genre of verbal duel. There is a group of verbal duels, however, which are sufficiently unlike the *mannjafnaðr* as here defined and sufficiently like each other to merit description as a second genre of verbal duel. Because Old Norse contains a second term, *senna,* denoting verbal duels, it is reasonable to use this term as the name of this second genre" (53–54). The logic here ("Because . . .") is unacceptable, of course. The passage is perhaps nothing more than a carelessly worded transition, but it seems to be indicative of methodological imprecision, too. Elsewhere, Swenson does find passages that suggest categories outside her *senna–mannjafnaðr* opposition, but she skirts them with an expression of helplessness, calling them only "frustratingly allusive" (111, a comparison of women by men in *Droplaugarsona saga* chap. 3) or "tantalizingly suggestive" (119, the reference to Guðrún's *hvǫt* as a *senna* in *Guðrúnarhvǫt* 1). (A more sophisticated approach to the genre problem in such texts may be found in Joaquín Martínez Pizarro, "Woman-to-Man *Senna*," in *Poetry in the Scandinavian Middle Ages,* 339–50.)

In order to isolate the characteristic features of *senna* and *mannjafnaðr,* Swenson used Cleasby-Vigfusson, Fritzner, Edda glossaries, and the *Lexicon Poeticum* to assemble a corpus of text passages in which the words occur; they are listed in an appendix. She notes that she has seen additional citations in the files of the Copenhagen prose dictionary, but that they do not alter her conclusions (32 n. 39).

Certainly it is appropriate, if one is looking for "ethnic genres," to start by mapping out in this way how the terms are used in Old Norse. Yet the analysis of the material here seems to follow deductive more than inductive reasoning. Of eight attestations of the word *mannjafnaðr,* Swenson disregards a priori the passages in *Grœnlendinga þáttr* and *Heiðarvíga saga,* in which the weregild value of slain men is compared, and the exchange in *Gunnlaugs saga* between Gunnlaugr and Þorsteinn Egilsson, which is "anomalous" and "may represent a rather sophisticated and conscious literary manipulation of the generic conventions" (44 n. 14). Of thirty-six attestations of the word *senna* (both noun and verb), one is dismissed as editorial conjecture, one as not Old Norse (Hallgrímur Pétursson's title *Flærðarsenna,* listed in Cleasby-Vigfusson), twenty-two as skaldic kennings for battle ("quarrel of swords," etc.), and five others as well in which the word means only 'quarrel, dispute'. Swenson's conclusions are thus based on only five of the eight attestations of the word *mannjafnaðr* and only seven of the 36 attestations of the word *senna.* The reader may well ask whether it is legitimate, in an ostensibly empirical analysis of vocabulary, to dismiss so many examples from the start because the words are not used in the "usual" way. We read, for example, that "this use of *senna* [in *Hávamál* 125] to mean simply a quarrel or dispute between two men differs from its usual use and represents a departure from its earlier meaning" (120). How can we say that the sense 'quarrel' for *senna* is not usual, when the great majority of attestations according to Swenson's own data display precisely this sense? It may indeed be that this less specific sense of *senna* is younger, as Swenson asserts; but this is something that remains to be proved. It is not proved in this book; proof is not attempted.

Moreover, three of the seven attestations of the word *senna* accepted by Swenson as characteristic can be made to fit her definition only if given somewhat farfetched interpretations. In *Hymiskviða* 28, Hymir begins to *senna* with Þórr anew ("enn . . . við Þór senti"), challenging him to a further show of strength. Swenson says, though, that the *senna* in question is not the physical contest at all but rather Þórr's and Týr's confrontations with women from whom they acquire helpful information (str. 8–9, 30), and perhaps even Þórr's battle with the world serpent (str. 22–24), "which may be read as a struggle with the feminine" (36, 120). Two other examples are by Swenson's own admission dubious. The *senna* between Hallgerðr and Bergþóra (*Njáls saga* chap. 35) can perhaps, she says, be interpreted as a "definition of the self and the world" in the context of an abstract struggle between the world of lawlessness (Hallgerðr) and the world of law (Bergþóra), but perhaps *senna* just means 'to quarrel' here; the confrontation seems really to be more of a *mannjafnaðr,* she concludes (36, 123). And instead of taking the word *senna* in the first line of *Guðrúnarhvǫt* straightforwardly as a proleptic equivalent of "hvatti at vígi" in the third line, Swenson says that "perhaps the *senna* of stanza one alludes to Guðrún's whole struggle toward integrity of existence" (36). Swenson also makes a halfhearted attempt to rescue the skaldic examples for her definition of *senna.* In an etymological excursus she argues that "we cannot assume that the poets were unaware of all archaic resonances belonging to [the word] *senna"* as a cognate of words meaning 'truth' and 'existence'; that is, the poets who used *senna* as a base for battle kennings may have thought of battle as a struggle for existence, a kind of self-definition of the warrior (34–35). This idea is unprovable, however, and is made unlikely by the fact that *senna* is only one of forty-one words for speech, speech acts, and vocal noises listed by Snorri as possible base words for such kennings (*Skáldskaparmál* 72, cited by Swenson on page 123).

Another fundamental difficulty with Swenson's procedure is that, as she puts it herself, the "focus on texts containing key terms eliminated possibly significant other

texts from consideration" (111). While it may be true that "such restrictions are necessary to critical analysis," still the reader cannot help but wonder whether the conclusions in the book could not have been supported or modified with the help of more examples (including manuscript variants) in which the words themselves do not appear but the phenomena—by anyone's definition—do. Swenson does treat *Qrvar-Odds saga* and the *Hrímgerðarmál* part of *Helgakviða Hjǫrvarðssonar,* which are not in her corpus, as paradigmatic examples of *senna* and *mannjafnaðr*, but no other such instances appear in the book (except the passage from *Droplaugarsona saga* mentioned on p. 111), despite the fact that they are numerous and in some cases have already been the subject of scholarly investigation with goals similar to Swenson's. In *Gunnlaugs saga*, for example, Swenson considered (rather: rejected) only the *mannjafnaðr* in chapter 5, even though Gunnlaugr engages in *mannjafnaðr* twice more, in chapters 8 and 9. (The terms used are *þræta* and *kappmæli*, respectively.) And where is *Hárbarðsljóð* in the book? This famous and closely studied verbal duel ought to make an ideal test of the distinction between *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* (see Bax and Padmos), yet Swenson mentions it only to illustrate the fluid boundary between eddic poetry and prose (25–26).

The bibliography is not short, but it is a list of "works consulted," not works cited, and over one-third of them are mentioned nowhere else in the book, not even in a note. Even works that one would have thought vital for Swenson's research and argumentation are ignored in this way. One misses, especially, references to Martínez Pizarro's thorough 1976 dissertation on the early Germanic *senna* from both the literary and folkloristic points of view. One wonders also, given Swenson's focus on the element of sexual conflict in verbal dueling, why she does not draw on the feminist and other scholarship on women in Old Norse literature cited in the bibliography, such as the articles by Helga Kress, Lotte Motz, or Margaret Clunies Ross. (Another article by Kress, too recent for Swenson to have taken into account, is devoted explicitly to the verbal aspects of sexual conflict: "Staðlausir stafir: Um slúður sem uppsprettu frásagnar í Íslendingasögum," *Skírnir* 165 [1991]: 130–56.)

Furthermore, full as the bibliography is, Swenson's research base appears weak on the origin and development of *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* in the context of cultural history. She suggests repeatedly that they "originated in ritual" (e.g., xi, 44 n. 13, 59 n. 7), but offers only a personal communication from Harris and a general reference to Phillpotts's thesis as support. No one, it is true, can really do anything *but* speculate about such matters, especially given our incomplete understanding of both "genre" and "ritual," but still Swenson could perhaps have lent her discussion more substance by drawing on Martínez Pizarro's work (or, for example, on Holger Pedersen, "Mandjævning hos kelterne," in *Festskrift til J. L. Ussing* [København: Gyldendal, 1900], 185–92, not consulted). The rich scholarly literature on verbal dueling among the other Germanic peoples was, with the exception of a handful of titles that receive perfunctory mention, not consulted at all.

Swenson's treatment of the secondary literature that she does cite betrays a less than sure hand. The most embarrassing lapses occur already in chapter 1, in which Swenson reviews Heusler's classification of the "minor genres." Certainly, this classification is not above criticism, but most of Swenson's individual complaints rest on misunderstandings of the passages cited. Perhaps Swenson is not aware that "urgermanisch" and "altgermanisch" are technical terms. Heusler does indeed provide his own, perhaps idiosyncratic, definition of them (quoted in 7 n. 18 and 8 n. 19), but this definition seems to me clear enough and Swenson's puzzlement (7–8) groundless; it is a mystery to me why Swenson believes "urgermanisch" is a "synchronic" and "altgermanisch" a "diachronic" concept (8, 10). By different "gesellschaftliche Stufen" Heusler does not mean different "types of social systems" (8–9), nor does he say that a given example of a "higher" literary form is necessarily younger than a given example of a "lower" form and produced by a "higher social class" (9). The term "Klein- oder Gesellschaftslyrik," Swenson's bewilderment on page 12 notwithstanding, is explained carefully in the text cited by Swenson in the footnote; one can also refer to Heusler's

explanation of the term "Gemeinschaftsdichtung," cited in note 20 on page 9. Some of the misunderstandings are simply linguistic, as when "Unhold" is translated as "non-hero" (13). Only one longer passage from Heusler is given in English as well as German (12); unfortunately, Swenson's translation contains several errors, of which the most serious are "that which is born out of the everyday 'Gelegenheitsdichtung'" [die aus dem Alltag geborene Gelegenheitsdichtung] and "will be used throughout" [weitherzig genommen sein will].

Nor does Swenson's handling of the dictionaries inspire confidence. That she does not include in her corpus the word *ofsenna,* which is given (under *s*) in Hødnebø's supplement to Fritzner, is perhaps the result not of oversight, but of a conscious though unspoken decision not to include compounds. But the entry *senna* (noun) in Cleasby-Vigfusson is misread on several points. Swenson says that "Cleasby-Vigfusson translates this title [*Flærðarsenna*] as 'Siren-song' and suggests that the title was borrowed from an eddic poem, presumably from *Lokasenna*" (124). The editors do not say "an eddic poem" but "the eddic poem," that is, they refer unambiguously (not presumably) to *Lokasenna,* which was mentioned in the preceding line. (Also, Swenson should have mentioned that the translation "Siren-song" appears only in the entry for *flærð,* not *senna.* I do not believe the editors attached, even unconsciously, the same importance to this translation and its gender-specificity that Swenson does in her half-page of criticism of it.) Swenson says that she was "unable to locate two" of the citations in the entry "which refer to manuscripts to which I do not have immediate access" (32 n. 39): "deilur ok sennur, slíðrfeng s., Gh. I, MS. 544.39; ógóðgjarnra manna sennur, 677.6." These are three citations, not two. It is true that entries in Cleasby-Vigfusson are often difficult to decipher; this one is, in fact, a bit garbled. Nevertheless, Swenson ought to have recognized that two of the citations are already in her corpus. According to Cleasby-Vigfusson's source list (p. xiii), "Gh" is *Guðrúnar-hefna* (sic), i.e., *Guðrúnarhvǫt,* of which strophe 1, line 1 is "Þá frá ek senno slíðrfengligsta"; the whole strophe is in Swenson's corpus on page 119, cited from Neckel-Kuhn. "677.6" refers (see Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. xi, F.3) to leaf 6 of AM 677 4º, an untitled and at that time still unpublished collection of religious texts. It was published by Þorvaldur Bjarnarson in 1878, however, and it is to this edition that Swenson herself refers in citing the passage in her corpus (124), having apparently taken the reference from Fritzner. That leaves us with "deilur ok sennur, . . . MS. 544.39." "544" is Hauksbók, AM 544 4º, and the passage in question occurs in the fragmentary treatise on mineral magic on leaf 34 recto: "sigrar hann [the stone adamant] deilur ok sennur." Cleasby-Vigfusson's "544.39" is thus an error for "544.34"; the same error, incidentally, should be corrected in the entry "skyrsi." AM 194 8º contains a more complete version of this treatise with the same *senna* passage (leaf 48 recto); both this manuscript and Hauksbók have been published in full, so the *senna* references are accessible: *Alfræði íslenzk,* ed. Kristian Kålund, volume 1, *Cod. mbr. AM. 194, 8vo* (København: Møller, 1908), 82; *Hauksbók,* ed. Finnur Jónsson and Eiríkur Jónsson (København: Thiele, 1892–96), 228.

The numerous and often long quotations from secondary sources, both in the text and footnotes, are not always necessary or to the point. A short illustration: "The ÍF footnote to this passage [*Eyrbyggja saga* chap. 37] further stresses the customary nature of the *mannjafnaðr* as banquet entertainment: 'Mannjöfnuður virðist hafa verið algeng skemmtun í fornöld'" (116). This problem is particularly noticeable in digressions such as the discussion of *Nibelungenlied* research that opens the book.

Only very rarely—the criteria are not clear—does Swenson undertake to translate non-English quotations. The results in such cases are not reliable. To the Heusler example mentioned above may be added three lines from Finnur Jónsson translated on page 25 with the errors "finest" [fineste], "awkwardness" [flovheder] and "poem" (for the plural, perhaps a typographical error). Not even translations from Old Norse are free of errors. On page 49, Swenson translates "at ǫllu fróðr" in the portrait of Eysteinn in *Magnússona saga* as "in all knowledge," that is, as if the phrase read "at allri frœði" or "at ǫllum frœðum."

Finally, the book does not seem to have been copyedited with consistent care. A long bibliographical footnote appears twice (23 n. 11, 86 n. 12), for example, and many primary source references are not correctly keyed to the bibliography. Typographical errors are relatively numerous in non-English material. The most awkward specimen is no doubt "Bryndildr" (xiii), but I noticed about two dozen others, some of which look like grammatical errors: "edition of the *Hrafnistumenn sǫgur*" (86 n. 11), "meet up with Ögmundr Eyþjófsbana" (91). Sveinbjörn Egilsson's name is spelled with *ǫ* and *ó* as well as *ö;* in the bibliography we even find "Egilsson, Sveinbjörn. *See* Sveinbjórn Egilsson" (136).

On balance, then, the work cannot be recommended without grave reservations. The basic idea of a functional distinction between *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* is promising; Carol Clover's suggestion that any distinction be abandoned and the term flyting used for all verbal dueling ("Norse Flyting," in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* [New York: Scribner's Sons, 1987], 9:172–75) will probably not be the definitive solution. But Swenson's observation that *senna* is a confrontation of strangers, *mannjafnaðr* a comparison of peers is not new; nor is Swenson the first to see that one of the antagonists in a *senna* is often female. On the other hand, Swenson's distinction is hardly justifiable on a statistical basis as she would like, so we are back at our starting point. The other two theses mentioned at the beginning of this review are formulated even more broadly than the first, so broadly, in fact, that they are impossible to debate. There is simply not enough substance here for a scholarly book. Research on verbal dueling will not be able to leave the realm of subjectivity—Swenson's goal—until more progress is made in the theory of narrative and of genre, with attention also to the historical dimension of the problem. (For example: If at some point there were two distinct phenomena, did they arise from one? Did they later merge into one? Must a loose distinction necessarily have developed from a strict one? Must there ever have been a strict distinction at all simply because Old Norse attests more than one word for verbal dueling? What can the motivic parallels and differences, such as the recurrent settings "hall" and "sundering flood"—the latter not mentioned by Swenson anywhere in the book—mean?) Virtually everything remains to be done.

What is new and especially positive in the book is the discussion of sexual (and other identity-group-related) conflict in individual texts at the end of chapter 3 and in chapters 4 and 5. An article in which Swenson gathered these observations together in tighter form—perhaps including the comments on pages 119, 120, and 123 on *Guðrúnarhvǫt, Hymiskviða,* and *Njáls saga*—would be a useful contribution indeed to our understanding of Old Norse literature.

Marvin Taylor