"Ok verðr henni ljóð á munni" — Eddic Prophecy in the *fornaldarsögur*

he expression in the title of this article, "ok verðr einhverjum ljóð á munni" [a chant comes to somebody's lips] occurs a number of times in Old Norse literature, most often, though not exclusively, with regard to female speakers. The phrasing describes the narrative moment just before poetic recitation when the speaker is apparently subject to an impulse to speak in verse that is not simply a result of conscious thought or her own deliberate composition, thus associating the foresight and insight of particular kinds of female figures with the involuntary utterance of verse in eddic measure. The particular phrasing "ok verðr henni ljóð á munni" is found most often in *fornaldarsögur* or in episodes within other sagas that draw on similar narrative conventions, such as a visit by a *volva* who delivers her predictions in eddic verse, who is represented as giving voice to a truth beyond the workings of her own wit and fancy, and who appears to be compelled to submit to the interrogation of those who petition her.

The association between prescience and the feminine is known from the earliest accounts of Germanic culture. The Roman historian Tacitus reported of the Germani that "[feminis] inesse quin etiam sanctum aliquid et providum putant, nec aut consilia earum aspernantur aut responsa neglegunt" [indeed they think there is something holy and prophetic in women, and they do not reject their advice or ignore their answers] (Much 1959, 113). The corpus of eddic poems also

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^{2.} When, in instances in the \acute{I} slending as \ddot{o} gur I shall return to, the speaker is male, the utterance is not designated as a $lj\acute{o}$ but as a $v\acute{i}$ sa 'verse' and to different degrees exhibits characteristics of skaldic composition.

^{3.} On the genre of the *fornaldarsaga* see Reuschel 1933; Hallberg 1982; Tulinius 1993; Mitchell 1993. For the purposes of this paper, which focuses on a stylistic pattern that crosses generic boundaries, I take the corpus as constituted by C. C. Rafn's edition (1829–30).

proffers evidence that knowledge of the future is closely, though not exclusively, associated with females. In *Lokasenna* Loki is twice warned that the goddess he is abusing knows everyone's fate and should not be roused to anger, presumably for fear that she might proclaim what she knows.⁴ Ruled by the social expectation to promote domestic accord and maintain decorum at the feast, the goddesses' interventions in *Lokasenna* are geared to suppress revelations of scandalous behaviour and quiet inflammatory speech, their prescience a latent threat rather than a potent force. With the notable exception of Óðinn, very few want to hear what the future holds in store — in the words of *Hávamál* 56.4–6: "ørlog sín / viti engi fyrir, / þeim er sorgalausastr sefi" [let no one whose mind is most free of sorrow have foreknowledge of his fate] (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 25).

At work behind the warnings to Loki are two pervasive and somewhat contradictory characterizations of women in Old Norse myth: the attribution to them of the often nebulous and rarely tried power to foretell the future, and the more sharply defined characterization of their modes of action as socially circumscribed. When a stanza about Frigg's prescience is quoted in *Gylfaginning*, Priði elaborates: "ok veit hon ørlog manna þótt hon segi eigi spár" [she knows the fates of men even though she does not speak prophecies] (Faulkes 1982, 21.18–19). In *Ynglinga saga*'s account, prescience was among the wiles that Freyja taught the Æsir. Because it was considered too effeminate for males to practise, its transmission is said to have remained within the feminine domain, extending from the divine to the human realm according to *Voluspá*'s account of Heiðr's activities (*Voluspá* 22; Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 5–6). Further witness to the association between women and percipience is furnished within Snorri's enumeration of goddesses: "[Vor] er ok vitr ok spurul, svá at engi hlut má hana leyna. Pat er orðtak at kona verði vor þess er hon verðr vís" [Vor is wise and inquisitive, so that nothing

^{4.} Lokasenna 21: "Óðinn: 'Œrr ertu, Loki, / oc ørviti, / er þú fær þér Gefion at gremi, / þvíat aldar ørlog / hygg ec at hon oll um viti / iafngorla sem ec'" [Óðinn: "You're mad, Loki, and out of your mind when you provoke Gefion to anger, because I believe she knows all the fates of men, just as fully as I do"] (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 100). Lokasenna 29: "Freyja: 'Œrr ertu, Loki, / er þú yðra telr / lióta leiðstafi; / ørlog Frigg / hugg ec at oll viti, / þótt hon siálfgi segi" [Freyja: "You're mad, Loki, when you utter your horrible slanders; I believe Frigg knows all of fate, even if she herself does not declare it"] (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 102). Among the goddesses it is only Skaði who uses her knowledge of the future against Loki, taunting him about his immanent capture by the gods (Lokasenna 49). Perhaps her readiness to wield her prescience is related to her nature as both female and of the giant race, doubling her identification with the realm of otherness that encodes covetable knowledge in the Old Norse mythological scheme. In return for her temerity Skaði is dealt not only the usual accusation of sexual promiscuity but also a boastful account of Loki's part in her father Þjazi's death. The same kind of cruel boast is used against Frigg when Loki details his part in her son Baldr's death, underlining the vulnerability of goddesses to both sexual slander and to the exacerbation of their grief over the deaths of fathers and sons, should they think to use their knowledge of the future in verbal combat.

^{5. &}quot;Freyja... kenndi fyrst með Ásum seið... en af því mátti hann [Óðinn] vita ørlǫg manna... En þessi fjǫlkynngi... fylgir svá mikil ergi, at eigi þótti karlmonnum skammlaust við at fara, ok var gyðjunum kennd sú íþrótt" [Freyja first taught the Æsir sorcery... and because of it Óðinn was able to know men's fates... But so much effeminacy is associated with this magic that it seemed shameful to men to practise it, so it was taught to goddesses] (Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, 1:13–19).

may be hidden from her. It is a saying that a woman becomes Vor (Aware) when she finds something out] (Faulkes 1982, 29.39–40).

At issue most often is women's supposed knowledge of someone's ørlog: the thread of a person's life that leads to their death. According to accounts in the eddic poems, people's fates are allotted to them at birth by the norns, who, carving onto staves, script the narratives of individual lives. Voluspá 31 refers to the ørlog of the god Baldr as "fólgin" [hidden], not foreseeable by anyone. It is presumably for this reason that Frigg is not as thorough as she might have been in her pursuit of oaths from all animate and inanimate things not to harm Baldr. In Snorri's account of Baldr's death (Faulkes 1982, 45), he narrates the treacherous visit paid to her by the disguised Loki, his guile met by Frigg's guilelessness. Apparently unable to resist answering any question put to her, Frigg provides Loki with the intelligence he needs to plot her son's murder. The predisposition to answer any question asked of her seems to be another aspect of the female mind as it is represented in myth. Like the *volur* who know everything, goddesses seem compelled to make available to questioners the store of knowledge they possess, though the *volur* are sometimes less polite in their turn of phrase and more forthright in their bargaining. But ultimately neither seems able to deny the questioner.

In some *fornaldarsögur* a trace remains of this mythologically conceived feminine omniscience, a capacity that is both valued and denigrated and lends the speech acts of these prescient subjects particular and peculiar effects. Compelled to answer questions and yet exposed to physical and not just vituperative assault, their mouths are sometimes represented as the site of a grotesque conflict between instinctive response and pragmatic judgement. This is further played out in the stylization of prosimetric narrative, the utterance of eddic verse signalling the involuntary expression of what they cannot deny they know, and prose dialogue representing the social negotation of their compromised position.

In *Hjálmþés saga ok Qlvis*,⁷ the hero Hjálmþér encounters a monstrous woman described as having a horse's mane, tail and hooves, large hands, white eyes, and a huge mouth. She is carrying a fine sword, the likes of which no one has ever seen before. Being a hero in a *fornaldarsaga*, Hjálmþér is naturally captivated by the woman's superior weapon and appalled by her other attributes. He stands his ground when she makes a move on him and thinks to himself that he should not appear lost for words, a moment of psychological penetration in the saga narrative that registers the fundamental importance of formalized verbal exchange in an encounter of this kind: "Hann hugsar, at sér skuli eigi orðfall

^{6.} See Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrri 2, Reginsmál 2.4–6, Fáfnismál 11–13, 44.5–8, Hamðismál 30.5–8, and Hunnenschlachtlied 34 (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 130, 174, 182, 188, 274, 312). A description of the role of the norns is found in Gylfaginning (Faulkes 1982, 18.13–22), and in Voluspá 20.5–8 they are given the individual names Urðr, Verðandi, and Sculd [What-will-be, Becoming, and Inevitability]. Voluspá 17–20 tells how the first human beings were logs on a beach — ørloglausir 'without fates' — until the norns chose their lives for them and set their fates after the gods had given them life .

^{7.} This saga is only preserved in post-medieval manuscripts; see Pálsson 1985.

verða, ok kvað vísu" [He thinks that he shouldn't be lost for words, and recited a verse] (Jónsson 1954, 4:198). Hjálmþér recites an eddic verse in order to elicit her identity, his fright at seeing her the likely explanation for his ingenuous line — "Ólík þykki mér þú öðrum vífum" [you don't seem like other women to me]. She recites a verse in response, naming herself Vargeisa and offering to accompany him and faithfully tend to his every need, an offer he shies away from because of the unease such a figure might cause among his companions. Their negotiations continue in prose, the hopeful Hjálmþér asking if she will give him her sword, something she refuses to do unless he will kiss her. Vargeisa's announcement of this characteristic mythological contract — otherworldly possessions for sexual favours — induces in her an apparently altered state, in which poetry comes to her monstrous lips as if by some force other than her own will:

"Ekki skal þat þó, karlmaðr," segir hún, "þú skalt kyssa mik," segir hún, ok varð henni ljóð at munni:

"Sæk þú Snarvendil, sigr mun honum fylgja, horskr, ef þú, hilmir, vilt þér í hendi bera. Koss vil ek af þér klénan þiggja, þá muntu mímung mér ór hendi fá."

(Jónsson 1954, 4:199–200)

["You won't get it, sir, unless you kiss me," she says, and a chant came to her lips: "Take Snarvendill — victory will accompany it — if you, wise prince, wish to carry it yourself. I want from you a little kiss; then you will get the sword from my grasp."]

In prose, the hero confesses to being afraid of kissing her snout in case he gets stuck — a possibility Vargeisa admits is a real danger — but turning away Hjálmþér remembers earlier advice from another troll-woman and revives his chances of getting the sword by professing, in verse, his eagerness to kiss her in exchange for the sword. His eddic verse seals the bargain, and the delighted troll-woman then details the choreography of their exchange. He is to throw himself about her neck while she throws the sword up into the air; if he hesitates it will be his death. Hjálmþér is given no time for reflection or recitation as she immediately tosses the sword; he sensibly embraces and kisses her, while she acrobatically catches the falling sword behind his back. Well satisfied with his performance, she hands him the sword and recites two more verses.

Hún réttir nú at honum brandinn ok kvað vísu:

"Sel ek þér Snarvendil, sigr mun honum fylgja, jöfurr inn stórráði, um þína aldrdaga; snúist þín ævi æ til sigrs ok gæfu, hvar sem þú heim kannar, hugr er í konungs barni."

Ok enn kvað hún:

"Vertu ei svá ærr, maðr, at þú Ölvi grandir; vertu honum heill, hilmir, hann er þér hollr, fylkir; lát eigi illmæli æða lund þína; vel þér vini tryggva ok ver þeim hollr dróttinn."

(Jónsson 1954, 4:200–201)

[She passes the sword to him and spoke a verse: "I hand you Snarvendill, victory will accompany it, ambitious prince, all through your days; your life will always result in victory and good luck, wherever you roam, the king's son has courage."

And she recited again: "Never be so mad, warrior, as to injure Qlvir; keep him safe, prince, he is loyal to you, leader; do not let slander madden your mind; ensure your friends' trust, and be a loyal lord to them."]

Although Snarvendill's powers are reiterated in the first verse, the prophetic tenor gives way to warning and counsel in the second. Suddenly alive to the portentous nature of a troll-woman's poetic utterance, Hjálmþér warily asks if there are any spells on the sword ["Eru engi álög á brandinum?" segir hann]. Equally alive to the audience's enjoyment of the convention she replies, "No, but I will now place one on it" ["Eigi nein," segir hún, "en þó mun ek nú á leggja"] (Jónsson 1954, 4: 201).

This intimate encounter between a hero and a troll-woman concludes with Hjálmþér's peremptory inquiry about the identity of the member of his father's bodyguard who is to accompany him the following summer. In prose the troll-woman envisions the choice his father will offer him, and Hjálmþér innocently admits he will abide by his father's will. Vargeisa is again moved to involuntary utterance, and in a verse both prophetic and instructive, advises the hero whom he must choose:

"Ekki skaltu hann hafa," segir hún. Varð henni þá ljóð á munni:

"Kjóstu þann þræl af þengils liði, sem gefr svínum soð. Mun þér ei maðr duga af mildings hirð, ef þér glapvígr gerist." (Jónsson 1954, 4:202)

["You must not choose him," she says. Then a chant came to her lips: "Choose that thrall from the king's household who gives the pigs their swill. None in the king's bodyguard will support you if manslaughter occurs."]

This choice of course pays off, and the hero is well served by the troll-woman's advice. But left to his own devices, Hjálmþér is prone to forget the valu-

able counsel of troll-women, even when it has been delivered in the memorable form of verse. During negotiations with his appointed companion, Horðr, Vargeisa has to materialize on one of the benches in a hall in order to remind him of her advice: "Hann kom at einum bekk ok sá þar Vargeisu standa. Honum kom í hug, hvat hún hafði mælt" [He came up to a bench and saw Vargeisa standing there. He recalled what she had said] (Jónsson 1954, 4:203). On seeing her, Hjálmþér at once turns on his heel and resumes playing the part of the hero as scripted. The troll-woman's embodiment⁸ in the narrative at this point serves to remind Hjálm-bér and the audience of the prophetic strand which runs through the unravelling story of heroic adventure.

A similar narrative strand is found in $Qrvar ext{-}Odds\ saga$, though there the eddic verse is uttered by a volva named Heiðr — to an audience familiar with $Volusp\acute{a}$, this presumably signalled the quintessential prophetic voice. Like the volva who recites $Volusp\acute{a}$, the Heiðr of $Qrvar ext{-}Odds\ saga$ is keen to accept fine gifts in return for her prophecy, but unwilling to be bullied or beaten. Oddr is ill disposed to the volva from the beginning, hiding under a cloak while she delivers her prophecies to everyone else at Ingjaldr's feast, coming out only to threaten to hit her on the nose with his stick if she includes him in her vatic pronouncements. In the corpus of eddic poems, the volva appears well versed in the genre of the verbal contest as well as the $sp\acute{a}$ (Quinn 1998), and she takes Oddr on, delivering her prophecy for him in verse rather than the prose prophecies that the host and other guests at the feast have been treated with.

Heiðr mælti: "ekki fer ek at við hót þín, því er at fréttanda um þitt ráð, ok þar má ek ok frá segja, en þú skalt til hlýða," ok þá varð henni ljóð á munni:

"Ferr eige [þú] svá fjorþo breiþa, né líþr yfer *láþa* vága, þót sær of þik sægjom gange, þó skalt[u] brenna á Berorjóþre.

^{8.} The ability of the troll-woman to materialize in an instant can provide the hero with physical assistance as well as good counsel. In a later scrape involving a whale (Jónsson 1954, 4:232–33), Hjálmþér realizes he is in a serious predicament and calls to mind the offer of help from the two troll-women, Skinnhúfa and Vargeisa. As soon as he has spoken his thoughts out loud, he sees two vultures flying towards the whale.

^{9. &}quot;Heiði hana héto, / hvars til húsa kom, / volo velspá, / vitti hon ganda; / seið hon, hvars hon kunni, / seið hon hug leikinn, / æ var hon angan / illrar brúðar" [They called her Heiðr, wherever she came to people's houses, the volva prophesying well, she charmed spirits; she practised magic wherever she could, she entranced the mind with magic, she was always the delight of evil women] (Voluspá 22; Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 5–6).

^{10. &}quot;Valði henni Herfǫðr / hringa oc men" [War-father chose rings and necklaces for her] (*Vǫluspá* 29.1–2; Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 7). No detail is given in the poem of the kind of exchanges between Heiðr and the householders she visits, only that she was "angan illrar brúðar" (*Vǫluspá* 22.7–8).

^{11.} The *volva* in *Voluspá* implicitly warns Óðinn not to threaten her: "Hvers fregnit mic, / hví freistið mín? / alt veit ec Óðinn, / hvar þú auga falt" [What do you ask of me? Why test me? I know everything, Óðinn, where you hid your eye] (*Voluspá* 28.5–8; Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 7).

Naþr mon þik hǫggva neþan á føte fránn ór fornom Faxa hause." (Boer 1888, 15.2–10)

[Heiðr said, "I won't be put off by your threats, because your lot is to be made known. I may proclaim it, and you must listen." A chant came to her lips: "Whether you sail broad firths or surf the shoreline waves, though the sea drives you through storms, you shall still burn at Berurjóðr. A snake will strike your foot from below, gleaming, from the ancient skull of Faxi."]

Heiðr insists not only that she pronounce his fate, but significantly, that Oddr listen to it. The inevitability of his fate is underscored by the wording of its pronouncement — "ok þá varð henni ljóð á munni" — suggesting that the *volva*'s utterance is inspired by a presence beyond her body. In resisting the declaration of his *ørlog*, Oddr displays a less sanguine temperament than others in the audience who are said to be well pleased to preview their fortunes even though the span of their lives is touched on (Boer 1888, 13.15–17). In the saga narrative Oddr's fate is distinguished from the others not only through his comical attempt to use a cloak to hide from Heiðr's foresight but through the *volva*'s seemingly involuntary shift into eddic rhythm to declare it. Her insistence that Oddr hear the prophecy also works to establish a proleptic narrative that neither the hero nor the audience is likely to forget.

Heiðr's verse prophecy does indeed concentrate on Oddr's death: no matter where he travels, he will meet his death there at Berurjóðr, the place of his birth; and the cause of his death will be a serpent that will strike from within the rotted skull of the horse Faxi. The harshness of these involuntary words is softened by the *volva*'s prose address to Oddr.

Pat er þér at segja, Oddr! er þér mun þykkja gott at vita, þér er ætlaðr aldr miklu meiri en oðrum monnom. [þ]ú skalt lifa c vetra, þú skalt fara land af landi ok þykkja þar mestr maðr ok ágætastr, sem þá kemr þú, þinn vegr mun fara um hvert land, þat er þú kemr á, en aldri ferr hann svá víða, þá skaltu hér deyja á Berurjóðri. Hestr stendr hér at stalli, grár at lit, foxóttr; hauss hans Faxa skal þér at bana verða. (Boer 1888, 15.11–18)

[This must be told to you, Oddr, which will please you to know, that a much longer lifetime is allotted to you than to other men. You shall live for one hundred years, you shall travel from land to land and be thought a great and famous man wherever you go. Your renown will spread through every land to which you come, but it will never spread so far that you won't die here in Berurjóðr. There's a horse standing in the stable here, with a grey coat and a dark mane; the skull of this Faxi will be the death of you.]

Neither verse nor prose is to Oddr's taste, and he strikes the *volva* on the nose causing blood to fall to the ground. Claiming the assault to be unprecedented, Heiðr leaves the feast at once, taking with her the fine gifts offered by the host. Oddr also leaves to find the horse Faxi and kill it, burying it in a deep pit and covering it with a pile of large boulders and sand, declaring: "rent mun ek hafa þeim skopunum, at Faxi verði mér at bana" [I shall have thwarted that curse, that Faxi will cause my death] (Boer 1888, 16.9–11). This is the version of the prophecy in

the earliest extant manuscript of *Qrvar-Odds saga*, Stock. perg. 4° no. 7, 43v–57r (referred to as S), dated to the first quarter of the fourteenth century (the datings of texts are those given in Degnbol et al. 1989, 428). In the slightly younger version referred to as M (AM 344a 4°, 1r–24v, dated to ca. 1350–1400), ¹² Heiðr offers Oddr a three-hundred-year life span and the prospect of always being well received on his travels, but he still hits her: "þú skalt lifa ccc vetra ok fara land af landi ok þykkja ávalt mestr maðr sem þú kemr" (Boer 1888, 14.9–10).

The second stanza the *volva* recites also has an additional line in M which reinforces the prediction of Oddr's grand age: "þá ertu fullgamall fylkir orðinn" [when you are a very old king] (Boer 1888, 15, note to verse 2). Later manuscripts, which represent a younger version of the saga, preserve a more elaborate account of the exchange, Heiðr reciting an additional stanza in which she reprimands Oddr for doubting her words, insisting that a *volva* always speaks the truth, and a more circumspect Oddr claiming that if the horse gets out of the grave he has buried it in, it will be the work of trolls: "þat ætla ek, at ek láta ummælt, at troll eiga hlut í, ef Faxi kemz upp" [I think I may say that if Faxi ever gets out of this, trolls will have had a hand in it] (Boer 1888, 16.8–9).

After the long and successful life promised by the *volva*, which provides him with the kingdom of Húnaland, abundant income from taxes, and two male heirs, Oddr is moved to travel back to his patrimony, the Norwegian island of Hrafnista. His wife Silkisif expresses dismay at his plans to visit such an inconsequential piece of real estate, but Oddr's ties to his ancestral home are strong:

svá er þat ok, at eyin er lítils verð; þó vil ek ráða, hverr hafa skal; mun ok ekki tjóa at letja mik, þvíat ek em ráðinn til ferðarinnar, en ek mun skamma hríð í brottu vera. (Boer 1888, 191.9–10).

[it may be that the island is of little value, but I want to decide who's in charge of it; it's no use trying to dissuade me, because I'm determined to make the journey, and I'll only be away a short while.]

Oddr's trip to Hrafnista is a success, but as he sails south again he is drawn towards his fate at Berurjóðr, just as his mother had been when on the same journey her labour pains had forced her to put into land there (Boer 1888, 3–5).

Oddr siglir nú norðan, þar til er hann kom fyrir Berurjóðr. Þá mælti Oddr: "svá mikil forvitni er mér á at sjá bæ fóstra míns, at vér verðum at lægja seglin ok ganga á land." (Boer 1888, 193.9–11).

[Oddr sailed south now, until he was off Berurjóðr. Then Oddr said, "I am so curious to see my foster-father's farm that we'll reef our sails and go ashore."]

After a nostalgic tour of his now desolate boyhood haunts, Oddr declares to his

^{12.} For an account of the manuscript preservation of the saga see Boer 1888, I-LII; also Mitchell 1991, 109, for a recent summary. Bandle (1988) has analysed the significance of the variations between versions, as has Kroesen (1993).

^{13.} AM 343a 4°, 59v–81v (ca. 1450–1475); AM 471 4°, 61r–91v, 93r–96v (ca. 1450–1500); AM 173 fol. (late seventeenth century), referred to by Boer as A, B, and E respectively. See further Boer 1888, I–VII.

companions that the curse on his return has been dispelled, only to trip over something on the uneven terrain on his next step. Poking at the ground to see what has caused him to stumble, he sees the once-hidden horse's skull lying exposed. The appointed snake immediately slithers out of it and gives Oddr his death-bite, and it's all over for the hero bar the recitation of a long poem. In the M version of the saga, Oddr is mid-sentence in his declaration that there is little chance of the old prophecy the *volva* made ever coming true now, when he is distracted by something on the ground: "þat ætla ek, at liðin sé ván, at spá sú muni fram koma, er volvan arma spáði fyrir longu, — en hvat liggr þarna, er þat eigi hrosshauss?" [I think the chance of the prophecy the wretched *volva* made long ago ever coming true has now passed — but wait, what's that lying over there, isn't it a horse's skull?] (Boer 1888, 192.21–22, 194.1).

Analogues to a hero receiving an early announcement of his fate exist in other sagas. In *Orms þáttr Stórólfssonar*, preserved in Flateyjarbók as part of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (Faulkes [1968], 39–40), the young Ásbjorn is singled out at his father's feast by a visiting *volva*:

en þeim unga manni er þar sitr hjá þér, bóndi, er gott at heyra sín forlög, því at hann mun fara víða, ok þikkja þar mestr maðr sem þá er hann helzt, ok vinna mart til framaverka, ok verða ellidauðr ef hann kemr eigi á Norðmæri í Nóregi eða norðr þaðan í þat land. (Faulkes [1968], 70)

[and that young man sitting beside you, farmer, will enjoy hearing his fate, because he will go far, and be thought of as a great man wherever he goes, and he will do a great deal which brings him fame, and die of old age, as long as he never goes back to Norðmærr in Norway, or further north in that country.]

Like Oddr, Ásbjorn says he does not believe the prophecy, 14 provoking the volva to a more potent form of pronouncement. Having insisted that the matter is beyond his judgement, a chant comes to the volva's lips ("ok varð henni þá ljóð á munni") and she recites his orlog:

Þó at þú látir yfir lögu breiða byrhest renna, ok berist víða, nær mun þat leggja at norðr firir Mæri þú bana hljótir: best mun at þegja. (Faulkes [1968], 70)

[Though you make the breeze-horse (ship) ride over broad seas and travel widely, your fate will be imminent, in the north off the coast of Mærr you will meet your death: it will be best to say nothing.]

^{14.} As Lönnroth (1969) and Tulinius (1995, 144) have pointed out, this kind of scepticism towards pagan beliefs works to establish the hero as amenable to Christian morality. A similar attitude is evident in *Vatnsdæla saga*, quoted later in this article (40–41).

Ásbjorn's death in Norðmærr, his mother's ancestral home, is presented as inevitable in the verse prophecy, and not something a change of itinerary could preclude. Like Oddr, he is driven by curiosity to test his luck against the woman's word, though he decides to do so younger rather than older. "Er mér ok forvitni á,' segir hann, 'at vita hvórt þegar dettr líf ór mér er ek kem þar, sem sagði völvan arma'" ["I am very curious," he said, "to find out whether I shall immediately fall down dead when I get there, as the wretched *volva* said" (Faulkes [1968], 71).

Ásbjorn's hubris is underlined by his friend Ormr's counsel to respect the vǫlva's wisdom: "en eigi þikki mér þú mega um keppa, því at gnógu mart vita þess háttar menn sem hon er" [I don't think you're in a position to argue about the matter because people like her know quite a lot] (Faulkes [1968], 71). It is clear, however, that Asbjorn is uncowed:

> Sagði mér á seiði, saung um bat laungum, at ek á feigum fæti færik norðr á Mæri. Vætki vissi völva: vera mun ek enn með mönnum glaðr í Gautaveldi. Gramir eigi spá hennar. (Faulkes [1968], 72)

[She told me in her magic, in her long song, that with doomed step I would go north to Mærr. The volva knew nothing: I shall still be among men, glad in Gautaveldi. The trolls can have her prophecy.]

His bold mission to go north and rid the island Sauðey hin ýtri of the giant Brúsi is, as we might expect, ill fated, and Ásbjorn is tortured to death by the giant as a deterrent to other would-be interlopers. Ásbjorn's stomach is opened up, and while Brúsi is pulling out his intestines until they are completely unwound the hero recites nine verses. The opening lines of his *Death-Song* call on listeners to carry news of his fate to his mother, since he had promised her he would return to their ancestral lands:

> Segist þat minni móður, mun hon ei syni kemba svarðar láð í sumri. svanhvít í Danmörku. Hafði ek henni heitit at ek heim koma munda: nú mun segg á síðu sverðs egg dregin verða.

(Faulkes [1968], 75)

[Tell my mother she will never more comb her son's swan-white scalp-land (hair) during a Danish summer. I have promised her I would come back home: now the edge of the sword will be drawn against the warrior's side.]

In the case of both Oddr and Ásbjorn the call to foreign adventure is strong

enough to keep them abroad for almost all their adult lives. The volva's prophecy certainly establishes a perfect framework for adventure narratives (Tulinius 1995, 143), but in the context of local oral traditions it also provides the perfect explanation for what could keep such a promising figure away from home: only a curse on his return worked by trolls and made public by a hapless volva. The narrative function of this kind of prophecy may have been to inaugurate an association between place and dynastic fame that culminates in the commemoration of the hero's death and the transmission of his dying words. Both narratives belong to a set of texts that celebrate the deeds of the people of Hrafnista island (Hrafnistumenn), some of whose descendants settled in Iceland. 15 The sagas were written down in Iceland, their authors probably wishing to demonstrate — in an exuberantly comical manner — that the heroic qualities of their Hrafnista ancestors lived on (Faulkes [1968], 31–32). The identification of family with place that appears fundamental to the narrative structure of these episodes presumably passed from oral legend to written saga just as it had passed from Norway to Iceland with little diminution of celebratory spirit.

While the similarity between these episodes may be accounted for by literary borrowing (Faulkes [1968], 32), another encounter between legendary heroes and a *volva* suggests a deeper cultural identification of women's eddic verse with the involuntary utterance of truth. In *Hrólfs saga kraka*, ¹⁶ a *volva* called Heiðr is once again doing the rounds, but on this occasion she is performing her prophecies at the invitation of the evil King Fróði, who wants to seek out and kill his nephews, Hróarr and Helgi. Their sister Signý has already recognized them despite their disguises and burst into tears at the sight, another act of involuntary female expression linked to the revelation of truth in eddic measure:

Petta getr at líta Signý, systir þeira, ok kennir hún þá þegar ok grætr mjök sárt. Jarl spyrr, hví hún gráti. Hún kvað þá vísu:

"Öll er orðin ætt Skjöldunga, lofðungs Lundar, at limum einum; bræðr sá ek mína á berum sitja, en Sævils rekka á söðluðum." (Jónsson 1954, 1:6–7)

[Their sister Signý catches sight of this and recognizes them at once and weeps bitterly. The earl asks her why she weeps. She recited this verse: "The whole dynasty of the Skjöldungs, of the king of Lund, has come to one branch. I saw my brothers sitting bareback, but Sævill's warriors in their saddles."]

^{15.} The other sagas are *Ketils saga hængs*, *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, and *Áns saga bogsveigis* (Jorgensen 1993). All four sagas are preserved together in AM 343a 4°, three of them in AM 471 4°, and two in AM 567 IV 4° (Boer's A, B, and C respectively).

^{16.} This saga is only preserved in post-medieval manuscripts (see Slay 1960).

The king holds a feast to receive the vqlva, and asks her to prophesy. In the moments before the chant comes to her lips, her mouth appears to be seized by an involuntary spasm¹⁷ preventing her from keeping it closed: "Hún slær þá í sundr kjöftunum ok geispar mjök, ok varð henni þá ljóð á munni" [She flung her jaws wide and yawned excessively, and a chant came to her lips] (Jónsson 1954, 1:8). In her verse, she reveals that there are two untrustworthy ones in the hall; the king presses her to reveal whether it is the boys themselves. She begins reciting another verse but is interrupted by Signý, who tries to stop the exposure of her brothers' identities by throwing the vqlva a gold ring, and were it not for her susceptibility to involuntary verse utterance, this might have worked.

Hún varð glöð við sendinguna ok vill nú af bregða. "Hví varð nú svá? sagði hún, "ok er þetta lygð ein, er ek segi, ok villist nú mjök spádómr minn allr." (Jónsson 1954, 1:8)

[She was pleased with the gift, and now wants to break off. "What has just happened?" she said. "What I say is a lie, and all my prophetic power is going awry."]

The *volva* composes herself in prose in order that she might accept Signý's bribe. The king is suspicious and threatens to torture her unless she tells the truth.

Hún gapir þá mjök, ok verðr erfiðr seiðrinn, ok nú kvað hún vísu:

"Sá ek, hvar sitja synir Hálfdanar, Hróarr ok Helgi, heilir báðir; þeir munu Fróða fjörvi ræna, —¹⁸

nema þeim sé fljótt fyrirfarit, en þat mun eigi verða," sagði hún. (Jónsson 1954, 1:9)

[Her mouth again gapes wide, and the sorcery becomes difficult. She recited this verse: "I see where Hálfdan's sons, Hróarr and Helgi, are both sitting, fit and free; they will rob life from Fróði — unless they are quickly overcome, but that will not happen," she said.]

In this scene a conflict is set up between involuntary poetic utterance — which reveals a truth dangerous both to the object of the prophecy and the speaking subject — and prose, the language of compromise which the *volva* momentarily uses to try and extricate herself from personal danger. She cannot, because the prophecy has in a sense taken effect once she has given voice to it. With the king presumably in a state of doomed shock, the *volva* descends from the scaffolding she had been installed on and voluntarily speaks another verse, celebrating the fierce intentions of the young princes. In the conflict between poetry and prose — between the involuntary utterance of truth and the self-willed negotiation of social relations — the *volva*'s body, and particularly her mouth, is represented as the site of conflict. A further narrowing of focus is found in *Vatnsdæla saga*,

^{17.} The verb *geispa* 'yawn' is found elsewhere in connection with women who have prophetic powers: *Sigrgaròs saga frækna* (Loth 1965, 48.12), *Páttr Halfdanar svarta* (Vigfússon and Unger 1860–68, 1:580), and *Páttr Porsteins uxafóts* (Vigfússon and Unger 1860–68, 1:259).

^{18.} On the punctuation of this prosimetric shift, see Slay 1960, 11, notes to line 15.

when the root of the *volva*'s tongue is disparaged as an unlikely source of authority by a resistant subject of prophecy: "Mér er eigi annara at vita mín forlog fyr en fram koma, ok ætla ek mitt ráð eigi komit undir þínum tungurótum" [I'm not keen to know my fate before it happens, and I don't think my future is dependent on the roots of your tongue] (Sveinsson 1939, 29).¹⁹

The phrase "verða henni ljóð á munni" is not confined to the *fornaldarsögur*, occurring also in other genres at moments in the prosimetrum when the involuntary utterance of truth is used to extend the narrative. For instance in *Volsa þáttr* it is told that while travelling incognito King Óláfr and his companions pass the early evening in an unlit room in a farmhouse to avoid recognition. The farmer's daughter comes in and asks the guests their names; they all say they are called Grímr. Holding up a light and examining them more closely, she is suddenly moved to declare in verse that she recognizes her king before her: "uerdr henni liod a munne ok mællti suo . . . / kenni ek þig konungr minn / kominn ertu Olafr" [a chant came to her lips and she said . . . "I recognize you, my king, you are come, Óláfr"] (Vigfússon and Unger 1860–68, 2:333). Acknowledging that she is a very wise woman, the king nonetheless asks her to keep her intelligence quiet.

Nor is the compulsion to speak verse confined to the female gender. When the speaker is male, however, the kind of utterance tends not to be the prophetic ljóð that casts such a long shadow over the narrative, but the more mundane vísa (verse) or staka (ditty), poetry arising from the speaker's own reflections.²⁰ In both cases the phrase "verða henni/honum á munni" implies that the speakers are unable to suppress the words that come to their lips, but whereas the subject of a female speaker's revelation is characteristically the true nature of something she sees — either in the present or the future — the subject for a male speaker is most often his own deep feelings. In Njáls saga, a casual comment by Gizurr hvíti to Kári that he was lucky to have escaped the burning of Njáll and his family brings to Kári's lips a confession of his profound grief: "Þá varð Kára vísa á munni: '... / menn nemi mál sem ek inni / mín; harmsakir tínum" [then a verse came to Kári's lips: "...men take heed as I recount my grief"] (Sveinsson 1954, 354). Gizurr responds by saying that it is to be expected that he should have such intense memories of escaping from the burning house, but that they will not talk any more about that now. In a resumption of the discourse of stoic masculinity, Kári replies that he is going to ride back home.

In Svarfdæla saga Ásgeirr's sons are sent out to fetch herbs by their mother but return empty-handed, having visited their sister on the way home and left their sacks outside, where they are torn apart. Interestingly, it is a question from their

^{19.} A similar metonymic use of *tungurætr* (roots of the tongue) in disparaging another person's spoken judgement is found in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*: "Ekki þarf ek at eiga þetta undir tungurótu Odds" [I don't need to let this matter hinge on the roots of Oddr's tongue] (Nordal 1933, 285).

^{20.} One occasion when this formulation is used to describe poetic utterance by a man is in *Bandamanna saga*: "Of(eigr) s(egir) ok varð staka a munni" followed by a second stanza introduced in the more usual manner "Ok enn kvað hann" (Magerøy 1956, 41.11, 41.20).

mother that prompts Porleifr's admission of humiliation and intention to revenge: "ok fara þeir heim ok mæta mödur sinne. Hun spurde þui þeir hefde ecke med at fara. þa vard Porleyffe wijsa aa munne" [they go home and meet their mother. She asked why they hadn't brought anything with them. Then a verse came to Porleifr's lips] (Kristjánsson 1966, 36.9–11). Earlier in the saga their sister had noticed a wound on the body of one of the boys and was moved to declare its source: "Pað vard henne aa munne er hun saa þetta. Sia ben marker spiöte spor" [These words came to her lips when she saw this: "This wound indicates the mark of a spear"] (Kristjánsson 1966, 22.2–3). Even though her words are not in verse, the incident is another demonstration of the association in saga narratives between certain female speakers and the compulsive disclosure of their insights into events going on around them.

In comparison with the common formulation "þá kvað einhverr" [then somebody said] the wording of the introductory phrase implies inspired poetic recitation, channelled through the speaker's mouth. In the skaldic tradition the source for such inspiration is Óðinn, whose regurgitation of the poetic mead is implicitly re-enacted in every self-reflexive skaldic utterance. Examples of this formulation used to describe self-willed skaldic utterance by a man include the Bæjarbók Óláfs saga helga ("ok fann Sighuatr þat i ordum manna at þæir löstudu skalldskap hans. þa vard Sighuati visa æ munni" [and Sighvatr discovered from men's talk that they criticized his poetry. Then a verse came to his lips], Johnsen and Helgason 1941, 2:831.19–20) and Jómsvíkinga saga ("Ok þetta heyrir Æinar skalaglam sem jall mællti. þa vard honum visa æ munne" [Einarr skálaglamm heard what the earl said. Then a verse came to his lips], Vigfússon and Unger 1860–68, 1:195).

In the eddic tradition the source of inspiration is less clearly defined, but seems to come from beyond the speaker's own will. In cases where the eddic verse reveals present truths, the source is projected no further than the speaker's own ineluctable perception. In cases of prediction, the *volva*, the giantess, and the troll-woman are presented as knowing or seeing the future as a narrative event. The intellectual and physiological mechanisms for accessing this knowledge are rarely detailed, but sometimes involve a trance or state of possession.²¹ If the

^{21.} The description of a *volva*'s practices in chapter 4 of *Eiríks saga rauða*, for instance, indicates that spirits or powers need to be invoked to help the *volva* see more clearly, but they do not speak through her. "En um morgininn, at áliðnum degi, var henni veittr sá umbúningr, sem hon þurfti at hafa til at fremja seiðinn. Hon bað ok fá sér konur þær, er kynni fræði þat, sem til seiðsins þarf ok Varðlokur hétu . . . Slógu þá konur hring um hjallinn, er Þorbjorg sat á uppi. Kvað Guðríðr þá kvæðit . . . Spákonan þakkar henni kvæðit ok kvað margar þær náttúrur nú til hafa sótt . . . "En mér eru nú margir þeir hlutir auðsýnir, er áðr var ek dulið, ok margir aðrir" [Later the next day she was given the things she needed to conduct sorcery. She asked for those women who knew the lore necessary to sorcery called *varðlokur* . . . The women formed a circle around the scaffolding on which Þorbjorg seated herself. Then Guðríðr recited her chant . . . The prophetess thanked her for her recitation and said many spirits had now come there . . . "Many things are now clear to me which I was ignorant of before, as were many others"] (Sveinsson and Þórðarson 1935, 207–8).

speaker is represented as a medium, what she is channelling is presumably the unspoken narratives set by the norns, which she has the power to envision.

The prosimetric patterns of the fornaldarsögur suggest that when these sagawriters represented the ancient past there was a close association in their minds between verse prophecy — and the related enunciations of advice and curse (what to do and what not to do in the future) — and certain kinds of women. The volva is one such woman, but there are a cluster of other terms that attach to these figures (finngálkn, trollkona, gýgr, jotuns dóttir, risadóttir),22 who frequently have some affiliation with the chthonic world, living in rock caves or in the sea and attributed with knowledge about the future or the world in general beyond the hero's ken. The cultural association evident in these verses has its roots deep in Old Norse mythology, which Margaret Clunies Ross (1994, 127-28) has argued genders the gods' world as male and the giant world as female, generating myths in which male gods undertake quests for the natural resources of the giant world, including knowledge of the future and desirable material goods. Traces of this mythological configuration are apparent in the fornaldarsögur where male heroes embark on adventures, and women, who to some degree or another are unlike the women they usually meet, cross their paths and present them with information or weapons. In the corpus of eddic mythological poems, the volva presents a paradigm of this kind of female behaviour, acquiescing to the gods' demands for knowledge (in response to either magical chants, bullying, or the offer of jewellery), but sinking back into a comatose or dormant state after her recitation.

The dynamic between an active seeker after valuable weapons or intelligence (coded masculine) and the passive or dead possessor of those valuables (coded feminine) can be figured in narrative in ways that involve complex gender-role inversions. The masculine role typically belongs to the hero of the narrative who is playing out his $\sigma rl\varrho g$, either ignorant of its ending or defiant in the face of its proclamation. The feminine role is played by one in possession of desirable things, but one who resides outside the spatial and temporal frame of the hero's $\sigma rl\varrho g$, either in giantland or the world of the dead, where such possessions' only value is their desirability to a living hero, and where an individual $\sigma rl\varrho g$ is but a small part of a larger cosmic whole.

So, for example, in *Hervarar saga* Hervor plays the masculine role of an active hero on a quest, and her dead but rousable father, as possessor of both a valuable sword and knowledge of Hervor's *ørlog*, is cast in the feminine role. No matter how she's dressed, Hervor has an unerring sense of the truth: before disguising herself as the male Hervarðr, she claims her motivation for reclaiming her inheritance is the truth she sees in her dreams — "satt eitt mun mér / í svefn bera" [truth alone is brought to me in dreams] (Tolkien 1960, v. 17.5–6), and on confronting her father with her claim and hearing him lie that he does not have the

^{22.} See Kroesen 1996 for a discussion of some of these terms.

sword Tyrfingr with him, she proclaims — "Segir bú eigi satt" [You do not speak the truth] (Tolkien 1960, v. 29.1). Her father Angantýr is apparently less compromised by his dead state than his female counterparts and does not acquiesce immediately to the hero's demands. Indeed Hervaror has to call on the gods to signal the whereabouts of the sword by opening his grave-mound if he is not telling the truth (v. 29). Even after the truth is revealed when the mound spontaneously opens, Angantýr continues in his paternal role and implores her to go back to her ships. It is only after she remains unmoved that Angantýr succumbs to the duties of the otherworld and proclaims her ørlog (vv. 32–33). Still without the object of her quest, Hervor perseveres despite her father's insistence that no woman would dare to wield his sword (v. 35). Finally the thread between father and daughter snaps and the gendered roles of masculine hero and feminine donor prevail: Angantýr declares: "mær in unga, / má ek þér ei synja" [young maiden, I may not refuse you] (v. 37.7–8), and she responds by enunciating: "Vel gerðir þú, / víkinga niðr" [You behave well, Vikings' son] (v. 38.1-2). The paternal gives way to the vituperative — "vesol ertu máls, / fullfeikn kona" [you are cursed in speech, most evil woman] (v. 39.2-3), daughterly duty to safeguard the dynasty abandoned in the ecstasy of heroic success:

> nú er hilmis mær í huga góðum; lítt ræki ek þat, lofðunga vinr, hvat synir mínir síðan deila. (Tolkien 1960, v. 40.3–8)

[now the prince's daughter is in high spirits; I little care, friend of kings, what eventually happens to my sons.]

Angantýr's final words to his daughter advise her how to handle the sword: "takattu á eggjum, / eitr er í báðum" [do not touch the edges, there is poison on both of them] (v. 41.5–6). Here too the role he plays is similar to that of a trollwoman such as Vargeisa who ends her meeting with the hero with words of warning and counsel.

Another instance of a male attributed with the feminine characteristics of prescience and the involuntary compulsion to divulge it is found in *Njáls saga*. Suddenly aware of an imminent attack by Ósvífr and his followers, Svanr warns his companions: "Nú tók Svanr til orða ok geispaði mjok: 'Nú sækja at fylgjur Ósvífrs'" [Now Svanr started to speak, his mouth yawning wide: "Ósvífr's fetches are making an attack on us"] (Sveinsson 1954, 37). The description of Svanr's behaviour is similar to that of Heiðr in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, the words of both speakers apparently drawn out of them in the manner of a compulsive yawn. Svanr also has magical powers, and when he pronounces a spell to produce a fog to thwart the attack, his verse is spoken accompanied by deliberate actions rather than involuntary mannerisms: "Svanr tók geitskinn eitt ok veifði um hǫfuð sér ok

mælti" [Svanr took a goatskin and swung it around his head and said] (Sveinsson 1954, 37).

The passive nature of female knowledge recurs in the sagas in the representation of women's susceptibility to the involuntary utterance of the true nature of things behind appearances, including the real identity of disguised men and the nature of heroes' ørlog, even if the utterance is against the speaker's will and puts her at risk. In the fornaldarsögur disclosures of the truth are not always accompanied by a description of compulsive speech, but the pattern outlined above is still apparent, even if the women involved are stock comic figures. The only verses in Sturlaugs saga starfsama, for instance, are spoken by women the hero meets in a heathen temple. Sixty of them join together to recite one verse declaring their knowledge of Sturlaugr's hostile mission there and the grim reception they have in mind for him ("Þá kváðu þær kveðling þenna, er þær sáu Sturlaug" [Then they recited this ditty, when they saw Sturlaugr (Jónsson 1954, 3:141–42). The temple priestess, who has previously been described as being as large as a giant, dark as death, heavy as a mare, black-eyed, and, rather redundantly, evil-looking, says he will never escape with his life, and in an attempt to seal his fate, recites a verse detailing his gruesome end. The saga's sympathies are not with these heathen dinosaurs, and despite acquitting themselves well in their verses, Sturlaugr gets the better of them, making a mockery of the priestess and her prophetic words by running her through with a halberd and living heroically ever after, until, that is, he is overtaken by old age, an event foreseeable by all mortals, not just those gifted with prophetic vision.

In the mouths of some eddic-speaking women in the fornaldarsögur the speech act of prophecy is closely related to that of the curse, but because a curse is an assertive speech act, a deliberate articulation of the speaker's will, as opposed to the compulsive disclosure of involuntary vision, the relationship between speakers in the narrative is differently figured. One example of this is Buslubæn [Busla's prayer] in Bósa saga, spoken by Busla to King Hringr to induce him to lift his execution order on the hero Herrauor. It details all the frightful things that are set to happen to the king unless he reverses his decision: vipers will gnaw his breast, his horse will go lame and his ship sink, he will be impotent if he tries to make love, and — in an escalation of the threats — trolls and elves will burn his halls, stallions will ride him, and storms will drive him to madness (Jónsson 1954, 3:291–95). Just as the king has the power to cancel the edict that will spell the end of Herrauðr's life, so too can Busla negate her curse on his life. Not surprisingly, the king answers her prayer by promising to spare the hero's life, and she goes on her way. The manner in which Busla's prayer is introduced in the prose narration is similar to the assertive nature of Svanr's pronouncement of his spell: "Petta kveld it sama kom Busla í þat herbergi, sem Hringr konungr svaf í, ok hóf upp bæn þá" [The same evening Busla came into the room King Hringr was sleeping in, and launched into her prayer] (Jónsson 1954, 3:291).

In the fornaldarsögur the predisposition to reveal what is not generally known is spread across a wide group of female beings — as well as the volva who dwells among men, it includes troll-women (who mix their prophetic utterance with advice and warnings as we saw in *Hjálmþés saga*), temple-priestesses, and an Irish princess. It is Oddr who meets the Irish princess as he travels through the world during his long life. In an act of revenge for the killing of his dear friend Ásmundr, Oddr kills four men in a clearing and tries to kidnap a beautiful woman cowering nearby. She addresses him by name and reveals that she knows all about him, intelligence that to Oddr's mind makes her a troll.²³ She offers him money to leave her alone, but Oddr explains that is not what he is after. She then offers to make him a shirt — an even less attractive offer to Oddr — until she details the shirt's magical properties: it will protect him from cold, fatigue, and hunger and be invulnerable to weapons unless he is running away. In selling the idea of the shirt to him, the princess negotiates a variation of the typical bargain between hero and prescient woman: precious goods in return for not raping her. The inversion of the usual theme is played out further when Oddr returns a year later to collect the shirt and offers a reward to the princess, now known by name as Olvor. Having lost her father and three brothers to Oddr's arrows, she is having trouble defending her kingdom from Viking attacks and asks as her reward that Oddr stay there for three years. He immediately proposes another bargain — his services as a warrior in return for marriage — which she reluctantly accepts after observing "manngjarnliga mun þér mælt þykkja... þenna kost mun ek taka" [you must think I'm very eager to get a man . . . I'll accept your offer] (Boer 1888, 83.8–9).

When Qlvor hands over the shirt to him a chant comes to her lips ("Pá varð henni ljóð á munni," Boer 1888, 81.13), in which she describes the making of the shirt by women in seven different lands. 24 Its exotic origins and expensive manufacture presumably lend the shirt its magic properties, and perhaps Qlvor's declaration somehow gives effect to its potential — making her verse a kind of spell — for there is nothing in the verse that otherwise links it to the kinds of utterance that are introduced in this way in other sagas. Oddr speaks a verse in reply that is also found within the sequence of stanzas preserved at the end of the saga — the so-called Ævidrápa spoken as he lies dying after being bitten by the snake at Berurjóðr. This particular stanza is simply a description of how it felt to try on the silken shirt, yet its delivery is also described as a chant coming to his lips ("þa varð Oddi ok ljóð á munni," Boer 1888, 81.22), indicating perhaps that this saga author occasionally used the phrasing as a cliché to imbue the narrative with the atmo-

^{23.} In the earliest extant manuscript of the saga (S), Oddr simply says: "hvat muntu vita, at ek heiti Oddr?" [how would you know that I am called Oddr?] (Boer 1888, 73.17–18), whereas in M he calls her a troll and an evil being: "hvat troll veiztu, in illa vættr, hvat ek heiti?" [how do you know, troll, you evil creature, what I am called?] (Boer 1888, 72.19–20). In the younger version of the saga, she is also called a troll (A, B, and C manuscripts).

^{24.} The M version of the stanza reads "sex" but S, A, B, C, and E read "sjau." The lands listed in the verse actually number five.

sphere of staged, formal utterance set in the legendary past. The M version of the saga in particular shows this tendency, using the phrasing elsewhere when the other manuscripts simply read "kvað". ²⁵

The phrasing is used once more towards the end of *Orvar-Odds saga* when, in order to win the hand of another princess, Oddr goes to a country called Bjalkaland to collect taxes from King Álfr and his wife Gyða, worshippers of heathen gods and skilled magicians. In the S version of the saga Oddr kills Gyða and then engages her husband in a series of poetic exchanges aimed at denigrating the heathen gods, before killing him too and collecting the taxes. In the M version Oddr kills Alfr during a battle to win the town and confronts the queen, described as hofgyðja (temple-priestess), who is standing between the city gates and shooting arrows from all her fingers. As he sets fire to the temples, a chant comes to the priestess's lips ("ok verðr henni ljóð á munni," Boer 1888, 180.14-15), and she demands to know who he is. Oddr directs his disrespectful verses about Óðinn to her, before chasing her with an oak-club and finally killing her by hurling a boulder at her through the skylight of her temple. The difference between these two versions is complex, but once again an association is found between involuntary utterance and a certain kind of female speaker even when, across manuscripts, the content of the verses is similar.

Many scholars have discussed the way in which extant texts of eddic verse can be used to interpret the evolution of the literary genre of the *fornaldarsaga*. ²⁶ In general, verse is regarded as the vehicle for dramatic presentation and psychological interpretation (Lönnroth 1971, 7; Erlingsson 1987, 383) — most typically by the actors in the narrative themselves — expressed through the poetic genres of last words, farewell, boast, and insult, which, like operatic arias, retard the action and break the narrative flow of the prose (Lönnroth 1990, 78–81). The eddic verses examined in this article are of a rather different nature, in that they are spoken by figures who, by and large, are peripheral to the action and rather than retarding it, forecast it. Clearly authors and audiences of *fornaldarsögur* had a taste for this kind of narrative play, enjoying the stylistic and often comic possibilities that arose when a *volva* or troll-woman confronted the hero and reminded him of his scripted orlog.

^{25.} Oddr's response to Hjálmarr's question about whether he did anything to avenge the death of Ásmundr (a stanza also preserved within the Ævidrápa) is introduced by "Oddr kvað þá" in S, and "Þá verðr Oddi ljóð á munni" in M, A, B, C, and E (Boer 1888, 77.9, 76.11). A later stanza recited by Hjálmarr is introduced by "ok kvað þetta" in A and B, but "Þá varð Hjálmari ljóð á munni" in M; there is a lacuna in S (Boer 1888, 102.10). Also within the lacuna are two more instances of the phrasing used in M and the later manuscripts (Boer 1888, 97.13–14, 105.23–24), in the former with reference to stanzas by Hjálmarr, Oddr, and Angantýr, who within the same series of verses are described reciting without this marked form of delivery: "Þá kvað Hjálmarr þetta" and "Þá segir Oddr enn svá" (Boer 1888, 98.20, 99.9–10).

^{26.} Among these see Heusler 1941; Holtsmark [1965] 1966; Buchholz 1980; Hofmann 1971; Erlingsson 1987; Lönnroth 1971, 1990.

In these examples verse and prose operate not only as stylistic opposites encoding characters' different psychological registers, but also as concurrent narratological strands, reminding both the hero and the audience of what is in store for them. The prose narration is complemented by a particular kind of poetic narration which is lent authority not by the social standing of the speaker, but by the imperative nature of her utterance. The reiteration of the phrase "ok verðr henni ljóð á munni" in this narrative context suggests that whether or not these verses were actually transmitted from ancient times, saga authors wanted to represent them as the products of a culture in which certain women could perceive things ordinary men could not, and certain social situations could induce them to speak. In the recorded literature, the introductory phrase "e-m verðr ljóð á munni" may not always signal inspired or compulsive utterance, but often when it is used the mythological dynamic between masculine and feminine, between action in time and knowledge across time, is brought into play.

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