When Skalds Say 'Ma'am'

Roberta Frank

> Sǫnn orð gerik drós til dýrðar
> [true words I make to honour the lady]
> Sighvatr Þórðarson, c. 1036

The professional poets of medieval Norway and Iceland composed for great kings and warriors, fixing memory in stanzas that would outlast time. In the rituals of our academy, official praise can take the form of a *Festschrift*, in which the scholar so honoured finds her accomplishments sung by all and sundry, powerless to dam the flow or prevent familiar mention of her name. Rules of address are particularly tricky. Think of Emily Dickinson's calling on God:

> Papa Above!
> Regard a Mouse.

Early eleventh-century skalds preferred extended apostrophes, and I shall follow their lead. 'Architect of enduring works, gem of the Witwatersrand, the riven granite, scaler of the citadel of Milton and Blake, guardian of Chaucerian rampart and ditch, nourisher of the perennial conference groves, pie-master, word-wizard, mother of four, launcher of a thousand smiles, beautiful, deep-minded prop of the headdress (=woman), Eugenie R. Freed, you rule OK.' 'I liked that,' said Ellie, 'sing it again.'

One thread running through Jean's writings (see pp.) is that of 'the female portion', womanhood in Chaucer and Henryson, in Milton and Blake, and, most recently, in Æmilia Lanyer. The skaldic poetry of the North, with its frantic machismo and limited room for ladies, might not seem a good fit for our distinguished honoree. But 'the female portion' is not totally absent, even here.

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An occasional female voice, scolding and critical, is sometimes heard (Ross, Frank, '*Skaldkonur*'); three stanzas from a formal poem in court metre (*dróttkvætt*) have been preserved that celebrate a woman, a queen who managed to put her late husband's son by another woman on the throne;[1] some love poetry, of a sort, occurs in the sagas of poets (*Skaldsagas*); but most females in skaldic verse serve solely as ears.[2]

Between 970 and 1210, some sixty-five stanzas in *dróttkvætt* by thirty-three named and four anonymous skalds apostrophize a woman, sometimes in unexpected circumstances. One poet is moved to pass on information about a leaking boat:

> Then sixteen of us baled out, lady, in four stations, but the surf foamed. The sea broke upon the ship's hull. (I, 139, 130, 72)[3]

Another tells of finding his ship vandalized on the beach:

> A shudder passes through my heart; the man has lost a boat and ship on the flat shingle, lady; but who knows if I might not be willing to repay the one who burned the skald's vessel for the cold coals of the ship. (I, 143, 134, 74)

In what may be the oldest 'O lady' apostrophe in *dróttkvætt*, a skald announces his intention to go fishing:

> Let us have the sea-horse [ship] run with sea-feet [oars] from the north to the winged-with-tails prophecy-terns of the long nets [herring] to find out if the field-grass of glaciers [herring], which sea-swine [ships] root up, become available to my friends, noble lady. (I, 74, 65, 40)

The sources preserving these stanzas do not identify the female addressee or acknowledge her existence. Snorri Sturluson cites the last stanza, for example, as evidence that a run of herring broke the Norwegian famine of 970 (*Haralds saga gráfeldar*, ch. 16; *Heimskringla* 223). The writers of the kings' sagas were more interested in the facts they could get out of the early poets than in generic or ideological signals. And modern scholarship has, on the whole, followed in their readerly tracks. Since the content of skaldic verse is distinctly male-centred,

celebrating a masculine pride of life, it has until recently not seemed a very likely or positive source of information about women in the medieval North (but see now Fidjestøl, 'Ut no glytter dei fagre droser'; Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* 151–58; Jochens, Anderson and Swenson, Quinn).

Many of the most famous and prolific skalds—Bragi, Þjóðolfr of Hvín, Egill, Glúmr Geirason, Ulfr Uggason, Einarr skálaglamm, Eilífr Goðrúnarson, Hallfreðr, Arnórr Þórðarson, Markús Skeggjason, Einarr Skúlason, even Snorri Sturluson—never address a female in their verse; of those who do, a majority do it only once. Women addressees are excluded from the more esteemed compositions, the formal court *drápur* that make up about one-third of the 21,000-line *dróttkvætt* corpus, at least in the form in which these sequences have come down to us. Such praise poems, composed for a contemporary prince and recited in his hall, typically address both the king and his comitatus; women, if present, are never acknowledged.[4] Religious *drápur*, occupying another one-third of the corpus, also invoke two audiences, the king (or other denizen) of heaven and, this time, all men, not just those within earshot. One anonymous Christian poem from the thirteenth century, *Líknarbraut*, explicitly includes women as listeners: 'I call brothers and sisters to the poem.' (II 152, 162, 86) But it is only in the remaining one-third of the corpus, in the informal, occasional verses called *vísur*, *lausavísur*, or *flokkar*, that an individual woman is sometimes addressed.

When a skald addresses another man, whether in court, religious, or occasional poetry, what he is after is usually clear. Óttarr svarti's *drápa* on Knut the Great relentlessly hails that king: 'O prince, O king, O warrior, O enemy of Swedes' but also 'O generous seafarer' and, even more pointedly, 'O gracious giver of enormous gifts'. The skald and his addressee are here in a relation of reciprocity, a 'potlatch' system of mutual exchange: the poet's gift was his poem that obligated the prince to a counter-offering. In religious eulogies, the skald wants the object of his apostrophes, the ruler of the sky, to reward him with the joys of heaven. In the occasional stanzas, a poet's male vocatives tend to be either insulting ('you, warrior, are so drunk that you cannot find your way about') or hortatory, confirming fellowship ('warrior, let's attack Lund before sunset').

But when a skald addresses a woman, his 'O lady' apostrophe is not so much a greeting as a kind of shorthand, a mnemonic of masculinity. When he says 'O lady' he really means 'Notice me. Admire me, advise me, advertise me. Look lady, how good I am at being a man.' It is to a woman and not to a man, for example, that the skald announces how incomparably dangerous his battle or voyage was (I 423,

393, 195; I 309, 286, 146), how it was not cowardice that kept him out of the war (I 403, 372, 185), and how bravely he, or preferably his best friend, died (I 439, 409, 201; I 444, 413, 204). On the one occasion in the kings' sagas in which a skald addresses a woman (here the Vicountess of Narbonne) in order to eulogize her, his goal is apparently the same as in the male-eulogies, to obtain a *laissez-passer* into the rich world of her court (I 508, 482, 236):

> Your hair [or stature], wise lady, is more beautiful than that of most blondes. The woman lets her golden hair fall upon her shoulders like silk.

But the skald seems unable to sustain his adulatory posture, and quickly turns attention back to himself, to his own battlefield prowess, to his provision of fresh corpses for carrion birds:

> I reddened the feet of the greedy eagle.

It is as if, halfway through the stanza, a traditional generic rule reasserted itself, a rule that in *dróttkvætt* the female addressed watches while the addressing male acts.

This is the theme of three verse sequences composed within forty years of each other, beginning in the second decade of the eleventh century, by court skalds working for, respectively, Knut the Great (I 422–23, 392–93, 194), his contemporary St Olaf (I 238, 224, 116), and the latter's half-brother, Harald Hardruler ((I 381, 351, 176; on the locations and arrangements of these three sequences, see Bjarne Fidjestøl, *Det norrøne Fyrstediktet*, index svv. *Liðsm*, Sigv III, and ÞjóðA IV). Each poem contains the tag *út munu ekkjur líta* 'the ladies will gaze out' and depicts 1) a hero, 2) with retainers, 3) at the beginning or end of an expedition, 4) in the presence of glittering light, and 5) watched by a townswoman to whom the skald addresses his remarks. The viking poet expected his feats on the field to catch the feminine eye.

The first poem, the *Liðsmannaflokkr*, attributed to Knut's *liðsmenn* or troops, celebrates that king's capture of London in 1017, portraying it not so much as a political triumph as a colourful courtship display, a chance for the soldiers to show off in front of the ladies. The opening stanzas of the poem describe bloody skirmishes between the Danish and English forces; the skald is

apparently addressing a collectivity—his comrades-in-arms. In stanza 5, however, an unidentified 'girl' is mentioned, possibly the same female to whom, in stanza 7, he reports a recent Danish victory:

> Lady, where we attacked the company with helmet and mailcoat, it was almost as if a man held a savage elk. (Reading follows Poole, 'Skaldic Verse')

In the next two stanzas, the woman watches from her apartment as weapons fly over the field and carnage accumulates on the banks of the Thames:

> The bright lady who lives in stone will look out—often weapons glitter aloft over the helmeted king—(to see) how the prince of the Danes, eager for victory, quickly attacks the city's defenders; the sword resounds on British mailcoats.
>
> Each morning, the lady (valkyrie of drinking horn) sees on the banks of the Thames swords reddened in blood; the raven shall not go hungry.

The final stanza twice addresses the watching woman, ending on a note of triumphant return:

> Each day, lady, the shield was reddened in blood, there where we were out early on expedition with the prince; now that hard battles have been concluded, we can tarry, lady, in fair London.

The second skald to play on the watching woman theme was Sighvatr in his *Austrfararvísur*, a sequence addressed to the Norwegian royal court and describing the hardships and happy outcome of his journey to Sweden around 1020. The 'women will gaze out' formula occurs as the skald and his companions near their destination, Earl Rǫgnvaldr's stronghold at Skara:

> The proud ladies shall quickly look out, where we ride through Rǫgnvaldr's town; the ladies will see the dust. Let us drive our horses, so that the clever woman can hear from inside her house the gallop of horses to the castle.

Once in the stronghold, the skald twice addresses a woman:

> These dark Icelandic eyes have, ma'am, guided me far on the steep path to the bright ring. This foot of mine, lady (mead goddess), has gone full boldly over old paths unknown to your man.

Among the more than 160 stanzas by Sighvatr, this is the only one apostrophizing a female and, almost as rare for him, he uses a mythological kenning as his vocative, calling the woman 'mead-goddess'. The fact that his verse sequence as a whole is addressed to a body of warriors (it begins: 'Listen, men') did not stop Sighvatr from inventing, when the right moment came, another addressee, an admiring woman. The skald/narrator suddenly becomes an actor, a speaker, in the story he is relating, splicing his encounter with a woman into the travelogue.

In the third and final use of the theme, Þjóðólfr Arnórsson's *flokkr* on King Harald's sea-levy of 1060, a watching woman presides over a departure, a successful war-expedition. The poet has the king's ship launched under the eyes of the ladies of Trondheim, at least one of whom he keeps fully informed:

> I watched the ship, fair lady, launched down river into the sea. Look where the long planking of the proud dragon [=longship] lies at anchor. The mane of the glittering dragon glows over the hold, after the ship was launched from its roller. The adorned stems bore burnished gold.
>
> On Saturday, the army leader flings off the long awning, out where from the town proud women look out at the ship's sides. The young ruler steered the brand new ship west out of the river, and the warriors' oars dip into the sea.
>
> The king's army knows to lift straight oars from the sea. The woman stands and marvels at the movement of the oars as if at a miracle. Rowed it will be, lady, before the dark sea-tools (oars) split in two. The four-sided wood [oar] allows that in full peace. (Poole, *Viking Poems* 59–72)

The warriors sailing off to battle feel the gaze of women at the back of their heads, and an oceanic weight of expectations pressing them forward. Þjóðólfr composed thirteen stanzas in all about this expedition. The first seven (including the three translated here) are assigned by modern editors to the skald's loose or free-standing verses, chiefly because of their two 'O lady' apostrophes and use of the present tense; the final six stanzas describing the expedition are assigned to

Þjóðólfr's famous *drápa*, *Sexstefja*. The 'O lady' stanzas seemed to some saga-authors, and still seem to us, lighthearted improvisations, not suitable material for a formal royal eulogy. Yet a skald like Þjóðólfr, working about a century and a half before the first saga-compilations, probably had a different, more oral sense of literary etiquette. A poet performing before the royal household may not have wanted to praise himself or his comrades directly, but it might have been excruciatingly good manners to so indirectly, through the eyes of an admiring woman monitoring the situation. By shifting the point of view from actor to spectator, the three poets implicitly invite us, the audience, to see and hear and judge the happenings for ourselves.

About two thirds of the skaldic stanzas addressed to women are preserved in the sagas of Icelanders. But while it has not seemed likely that the stanzas just cited from the kings' sagas are spurious, late fabrications attributed to early skalds, little of the verse in the sagas of Icelanders is considered secure. Composers of these sagas, unlike those of the kings', usually make the skald's apostrophized woman a full participant in the narrative, giving her a name and literary function. Two sagas in this group are responsible for almost half of all female apostrophes in the first volume of *Skjaldedigtning*. Kormakr addresses a woman twenty-four times, more than double the number of his runner-up, Gísli, with eleven. Fewer than half of Kormakr's female vocatives occur in the twenty-four stanzas making up his love poetry, and those that do chiefly express his exasperation that the woman had the bad taste to get herself married to another man. The context is one of males competing for the same woman, of the skald's struggle to gain a momentary advantage over another man. In the sagas of Icelanders, it is when the skald is most absorbed in himself—his dreams, fears, recollections, and hopes, his interiorness or his extinction—that he is most likely to address the 'other'. (Such vocatives were also a convenient way to 'fill' a verse when external nominal elements—kennings for kings, battle, or gold, for example—were lacking.) Skalds tell their dreams to apostrophized women. They also tell a woman in what part of the anatomy they have been wounded and how well they are dying.

The skald's use of female vocatives suggests that feud in Iceland was very much a woman's business. When Víga-Glúmr goes home to mother and finds that enemies have encroached upon his property, he quickly composes a stanza to reassure her of his belligerent intentions (I 118, 112, 63). When a skald worries that his reputation has been damaged, that his exacting of vengeance was not

carried out in a classically heroic way, it is to a female that he presents his defence (I 119, 113, 64; I 121, 116, 65). The last datable *dróttkvætt* verse to address a woman was composed by Guðmundr Galtason in 1210 when men were criticizing his friend Hrafn for making peace; the woman addressed is said by the saga-author to be Hrafn's sister. The skald assures her that, in his opinion, Hrafn behaved well (II 43, 52, 32):

> Lady (linen-land), I hear men blame Hrafn for peaceableness. People in the land are too sneaking. The man (=I) will relate good testimony; the sword-god (Hrafn) is completely prudent.

It is to a female and not to a male relative that the skald confides his careful judgment of Hrafn's character. Despite her exclusion from most political and legal power—or maybe because of it—it was her duty and, above all, in her interest to maintain the reputation of the men in the family.

One poet who seems extraordinarily sensitive to what women were expecting of him is Þórarinn svarti of *Eyrbyggja saga*, a peacemaker, 'a man so reluctant to involve himself in disputes that his enemies said that there was no less of the nature of women in him than of men' (*Eyrbyggja saga* 36). His seventeen-stanza sequence, the *Máhlíðingavísur*, contains eight references to females, beginning with his boast that he warded off reproaches from women and ending with his plea to a woman that he did not break any law in killing his opponent (I 115, 109, 62). One stanza (I 114, 108, 62), recited by him after he and a male friend have set off, contains two statements, the first probably and the second certainly directed to a woman.[5] The skald begins by recalling good days in the past with his male friend:

> We will remember, Vermundr and I, that we were happy at times, before, lady, I/we caused the man's death.

He then expresses his fear to her that he may soon be forced to take to his heels to avoid the bloodshed he hates:

> Now I fear, lady, that I shall end up retreating before the proud chieftain; battle is hateful to me.

Þórarinn addresses a man three times in his poem, in contexts different from those in which women are addressed. Apparently male bonding is fine and good, but when something is really troubling the skald he tells it to the judge—a woman. There was a set of conventions in skaldic poetry that 'saw' male and female

differently, that gave to women a power that was not theirs by law but by custom and circumstance. The skald's listening women are not merely decorative: they are there to ensure that masculine standards are upheld.

Saga-authors make use of a similar convention. Women, who are otherwise unknown and who never appear again in the prose, are sometimes introduced as a way of eliciting stanzas from a skald. After the battle at Stiklarstaðir, for example, the skald Þormóðr is asked by a woman tending the injured: 'Are you one of the king's men...?' Þormóðr replies in the affirmative with a stanza that includes an 'O lady' vocative. When she again questions him—'Who fought best alongside the king today?'—he proffers another verse. Her third and final question—'How did the king advance?'—is answered by a stanza commending King Olaf's courage (*Fóstbræðra saga* 270–01; for additional examples, see O'Donoghue 74–76). At saga's end, Þormóðr, gravely wounded, speaks his final stanza to a woman who asks: 'Why are you so pale?' He begins—'I am not ruddy', observes that 'iron' has caused his pallor, and, after one last 'O lady' vocative, falls to the ground dead (*Fóstbræðra saga* 274–76). The curious woman of the prose and the apostrophized lady of the poetry are here two sides of the same coin.

Eugenie Freed writing about William Blake (126) quotes lines from *Jerusalem*:

> What may Man be? Who can tell! but what may Woman be
> To have power over Man from Cradle to corruptible Grave?
> (34[30].25–26)

The skalds' female apostrophes also acknowledge, if more indirectly, man's uneasy dependence on women and the threat that this embodies. What, after all, was the point of the institutionalized male violence celebrated by the skalds, those excessive vendettas and duels, that piracy and harrying, if women were not watching you, judging you, monitoring your performance, comparing you to the next burly breaker-of-rings? Women's voices represented public opinion, and what they said could make or unmake a man. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, two Swedish berserks, lost in admiration of a woman, address her in their verses as 'goddess of the forearm's fire [gold]', 'linen-decked one', 'wise heeding-goddess of the board-game', 'field of the sun of the belt of islands [sea > gold]', 'pine-tree of the fire of the hawk's rest [wrist > gold]', 'land of treasure', 'goddess of the bright vessel', and 'smiling-voiced one'. They could have been describing the dedicatee of this volume.

NOTES

1. The epigraph above comes from 'In Praise of Ástríðr Óláfsdóttir'. See the article by Jesch.
2. I am grateful to the Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo for permission to reprint here some material from my conference paper 'Why Skalds Address Women'.
3. Numbers in parentheses give the location of the stanza in the standard editions. The roman numeral refers to the volume, the arabic the page, in the following sequence: 1. *Den norsk-isländske skjaldedigtning*, A. Tekst; 2. The same, B. Rettet tekst; 3. *Den norsk-isländska skaldediktningen*.
4. On the skald's two-fold addresses, see Kreutzer 264–66. On vocatives, see Kuhn §82a and Gade 84, 223–24.
5. To create the first woman-kenning, editors have emended MS *auðar þollr* 'tree (m.) of riches' [=man] to *auðar þǫll* 'tree (f.) of riches' [=woman].

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