

OLD NORSE RIDDLES AND OTHER VERBAL CONTESTS IN PERFORMANCE*

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Prelude

I met John Miles Foley for the first time shortly after arriving at Harvard. John had been invited by Albert Bates Lord, Arthur Kingsley Porter Professor of Slavic and Comparative Literature, to speak to the students and faculty affiliates of the Committee on Degrees in Folklore and Mythology. By that time, “ABL” and John knew each other well, especially as John had spent time at Harvard as a fellow at the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature. Both men were, of course, steeped in the older Germanic vernaculars, and, as it happened, one of John’s first published articles some years earlier had dealt with the first of the so-called “Storm Riddles,” Old English Riddle 1.¹ By coincidence, or fate, one of my own earliest, and then-in-press, forays into scholarship also treated this text,² so the table-talk at dinner following John’s presentation was in my memory even more animated and footnote-rich than the usual high standard set by those two learned gentlemen.

It is then with fond memories of the relationship that grew from that evening, in its fourth decade at the time of John’s deeply regrettable and all-too-early death, that I here return to the genre of the Germanic riddle, the topic that played an early, if minor, role in my friendship with John Foley. But unlike my previous, philologically oriented attempt to compare Old English and Old Norse metaphoric tropes and their complex relationship to the riddle genre, I examine the topic now from a significantly different perspective, one largely inspired by John’s bold and creative thinking about traditional oral literature and its relationship to contemporary oral forms.

As will become apparent, my comments are mainly concerned with re-contextualizing possible performance contexts for riddles and other verbal, often question-and-answer, confrontations represented in Old Norse literature as part of a large group of games and competitive confrontations whose enactments are broadly recoverable;³ thus, what I have to say is less concerned with the literary and intellectual conception of the genres than are, for example, the descriptions we usually encounter in literary histories, tomes understandably concerned with tracing hermeneutic genealogies, especially

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1 Foley, “Riddle I”; cf. Foley, “Riddles 53, 54, and 55.”

2 Mitchell, “Ambiguity and Germanic Imagery.”

3 On possible oral enactments of Eddic poetry, cf. the arguments in Gunnell, “Skírnisleikur”; and Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*. Of course, there exists a substantial body of literature that touches on the comparison of the Old Norse to modern traditions, including Harris, “The *senna*”; Bax and Padmos, “Two Types of Verbal Dueling”; H. Davidson, “Insults and Riddles”; Swenson, *Performing Definitions*; and Pakis, “Honor, Verbal Duels, and the New Testament.”

the relationship between the literary riddle and the folk riddle.⁴ Or, put another way, the thumb on the scale in this brief essay favours “who” and “how” over “what,” but it also attempts not to lose sight of the inter-connectedness of those three interrogatives in the best tradition of John’s intellectual legacy.

Introduction

The riddle, of course, is a special sort of conundrum or enigma, although it is much more than just that. One early specialist of the genre was largely satisfied to say that it “compares an object to another entirely different object,” although, importantly, he does add that it consists of a positive and a negative descriptive element, the latter being what is generally called a “blocking element.”⁵ In recent decades, there has been a substantial recognition of the subtleties with which riddles are constructed and deployed, and proposed answers judged;⁶ moreover, scholars have come to recognize that riddles are not subject to rigid and exclusive single-answers, but rather that their solutions often correspond to a range of potentially correct answers.⁷ This last point is of no small consequence when it comes to the question of riddles in a competitive setting, since it allows the riddler the opportunity to deny the acceptability of the proposed answer and put an alternative in its place as the “correct” answer being looked for.

One recent scholar captures the essence of the riddle when he writes, in part, that it “can be generally characterized as a verbal game consisting of a question and answer.”⁸ The important characterization of the riddle as a type of “verbal game” stresses the necessarily competitive element of the genre, for as most of us will recognize, the question and answer aspect, although important, is only part of what makes a riddle a riddle. If one asks, “When does the next train arrive?” for example, and is told, “At 10:00,” that is obviously *not* a riddle. Andrew Welsh goes on to refine this initial description, and amplifies this point by noting the presence of “confusing or contradictory” elements in the question and further that these elements “may be implicit in the description itself or explicitly expressed in a ‘block element.’”⁹ These points are all crucial to understanding what happens when riddles are encountered in situ, as Petsch already observed in the nineteenth century when he distinguished between “Kernelement” (core element) and “Rahmenelement” (frame element) of the riddle, and carefully placed the riddle in the context of listeners and audiences.¹⁰

4 Cf. the applicability of the comment in Burns, “Riddling,” 141, that his “study focuses not on the riddle as a generic form but on riddling as a genre of traditional behavior.”

5 Taylor, “Riddle,” 129. On this and other early scholarship on the riddle, see especially Georges and Dundes, “Toward a Structural Definition”; and Green and Pepicello, “Riddle Process.” For the Nordic riddle in particular, see Bødker and others, *Nordic Riddle*.

6 For example Lieber, “Riddles, Cultural Categories.”

7 Cf. Ben-Amos, “Solutions to Riddles,” 249.

8 Welsh, “Riddle,” 824.

9 Welsh, “Riddle,” 824.

10 Petsch, *Neue Beiträge*, 49. Petsch was, to the best of my knowledge, the first to note this point

To Welsh's estimable characterization, one would want to add, importantly, that a riddle is asked, or performed, *within a tradition of customary knowledge*; outsiders are unlikely to possess adequate familiarity with the range of possibly correct answers, so there is also an a priori insider quality to solving riddles correctly, as many scholars have pointed out. As another standard reference work on folklore puts it, "The 'true riddle' [...] relies on concrete, familiar objects *in the culture*, and it equates two things through the use of a metaphor."¹¹ Understood thus, a riddle is a description or comparison, posed by one interlocutor to another, in which an intentionally ambiguous element has been inserted with the result that the description as a whole corresponds to a wide range of potentially acceptable answers but prevents the "correct" answer from being obvious.¹² The object of the game is, of course, to provide sufficient correct information styled in a sufficiently veiled form so as to trick the opponent and suggest to observers, even to demonstrate, the questioner's superior mental faculty.

Old Norse Riddles and other Genres

Once a fairly lonely area of research, and subject largely to sporadic forays into the topic,¹³ the early Nordic riddle seems to have come into its own in recent years. Especially important has been the publication of two books touching on the genre in northern Europe, Frauke Rademann-Veith's 2010 exploration of the early modern Nordic riddle book in relation to various German models, and Jeffrey Love's 2013 *The Reception of Hervarar Saga ok Heiðreks from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century*.¹⁴

Not surprisingly, the enigmatic nature of the riddle and the equally enigmatic nature of the Old Norse convention of the skaldic kenning make comparisons of the two types of puzzling-out forms inevitable. And, indeed, the similarity of riddles to kennings has long been noted in modern scholarship, an observation stretching back at least a century to Finnur Jónsson,¹⁵ who notes in his literary history that kennings, like riddles, build on the interplay between the simultaneous similarity and disjunction of the several items involved: "I enhver omskrivning ligger der en sammenligning og tillige en adskillelse, aldeles som tilfælde er med gåder" (In every paraphrase there is a comparison and also

when he refers to the "hemmendes Element," that is, an element that frustrates or inhibits finding the answer.

11 Noyes, "Riddle," 728; emphasis mine.

12 A point noted by most modern students of the genre, for example Abrahams and Dundes, who write, "Riddles," 130, that riddles are "framed with the purpose of confusing or testing the wits of those who do not know the answer."

13 For example Finnur Jónsson, "Um þulur og gátur"; Heusler, "Die altnordischen Rätsel"; and H. Davidson, "Insults and Riddles."

14 Rademann-Veith, *Die skandinavischen Rätselbücher*; Love, *Reception of Hervarar Saga ok Heiðreks*. Of course, the vast glossary of terms developed for this folklore type and its sub-divisions in the various Nordic languages (cf. Bødker and others, *Nordic Riddle*) is itself testimony to the vitality of its study in modern contexts.

15 Finnur Jónsson, *Den Islandske Litteraturs*; cf. Finnur Jónsson, "Um þulur og gátur."

a distinction, just as is the case with riddles).¹⁶ The overlapping character of the two genres has, since that time, been commented on by no less than Andreas Heusler, Jan de Vries, and Jón Helgason;¹⁷ however, it is especially with John Lindow's 1975 article treating the broader, and in part extra-linguistic, relationship between these two genres that scholarship embarked on a more precise sense for the social function of these two special kinds of puzzles.¹⁸

That the Old Norse poetic convention of the kenning is frequently likened to the riddle is based on the fact that the correct referents of these extended metaphors must, like the answers to riddles, be carefully worked out among the broad range of possible answers due to the frequently inherent, and sometimes manufactured, ambiguities contained in the imagery. There have, of course, been many attempts to capture the essence of the kenning but, to take two notable English-language suggestions, Jess B. Bessinger describes the kenning as "an implied simile in circumlocution for a noun not named,"¹⁹ while Lindow offers a more subtle characterization, calling the kenning, "a traditional, verbal, poetic figure composed of one or more nominal descriptive elements (a pair of) which may be in opposition."²⁰ Yet unlike the riddle, there is presumably no specific "blocking element" that looks to obscure the meaning of the kenning; however, as any modern student of Old Norse will know, that is a function which, it could be argued, is carried out by the often astronomically high levels of esoteric information used in formulating these metaphors.

Seemingly of a different sort are Old Norse wisdom confrontations, which likewise appear to be part of a game in our extant texts, and in our textual sources a deadly game.²¹ The most obvious instance of such a confrontation in Old Norse literature, where the text builds on a wisdom contest between two actors, is the Eddic poem *Vafþrúðnismál*, where one easily envisions the two interlocutors exchanging questions and answers; at the same time, however, this interesting exchange of questions does not directly involve what most scholars today would regard as "true riddles." Yet it is obvious that this wisdom contest would fit Welsh's view that riddles "can be generally characterized as a verbal game consisting of a question and answer."²²

With these broad characterizations and similarities in mind, one quickly sees that a number of medieval texts, and even many medieval genres, might properly fit such parameters. Thus, for example, eleven fourteenth-century Latin riddles are recorded in one of the manuscripts of the laws of the Swedish province of Västergötland, Stock-

¹⁶ As quoted in Lindow, "Riddles, Kennings," 311. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

¹⁷ Heusler, "Die altnordischen Rätsel"; Heusler, *Die altgermanische Dichtung*, 131–32; de Vries, "Om Eddaens Visdomsdigtning"; and Jón Helgason, "Norges og Islands Digtning," 23.

¹⁸ Lindow, "Riddles, Kennings."

¹⁹ Bessinger, "Kenning," 434.

²⁰ Lindow, "Riddles, Kennings," 315.

²¹ On which see Larrington, *Store of Common Sense*, and the literature cited there, as well as the bibliography in Poole, *Old English Wisdom Poetry*.

²² Welsh, "Riddle," 824.

holm, Royal Library (HSS), Holm. B 59.²³ Here, formulaically developed queries are posed, where the line between the sort of religious question-and-answer texts common in the Middle Ages (for example, *Lucidarius*, *Viðræða lærisveins ok meistara*) and religious riddles can be seen to be quite thin. Given the fact that, as Erik Wahlgren notes, in all but one of the cases, the answer being looked for in these eleven riddles is a famous biblical person, not an object or a tale, the answers may at first appear to be easy and straightforward, yet the questions themselves clearly bear the characteristics we would associate with riddling, especially the so-called “blocking element,” that dissembling data point that looks to conceal the obvious answer. So, for example, among these Latin texts, one finds,

Quis f[uit natus et non] mortuus. helyas. et Enoc.
Quis fuit mortuus [et non natus.] Adam.²⁴

(Who was born but did not die? Elijah and Enoch.
Who died but was not born? Adam.)

Enigmas of this sort, which test the individual’s knowledge of the Bible or church teaching, were part of the European-wide learned Latin clerical culture. Their purpose must have been as much to teach as to test knowledge, and, indeed, pedagogical riddles represent a recognized functional category of riddling.²⁵

In fact, such forms are part of a long and widespread tradition of knowledge testing, and it is not difficult to find modern counterparts, such as nineteenth- and twentieth-century American traditions of “scripture cake” and other implicit tests of an individual’s knowledge of the Bible (for example, “mix half a cup of 1 Samuel 14:25 into a cup of Proverbs 10:26,” that is, mix half a cup of honey into a cup of vinegar).²⁶ Yet there is much more to these medieval examples than we see in “scripture cake” recipes: these modern-day contests are straightforward as regards knowledge. The “blocking element” represents a paramount difference, pushing these simple questions into the area of the riddle. In contrast to “Who died but was not born?” a question like “Who did God create as the first man?” would, for a medieval Christian, be more or less the equivalent of “When does the train arrive?” The quandary created by combining someone dying without having been born provides the riddle-like or blocking element.

As to why these riddles have been recorded on an Old Swedish legal document, Wahlgren offers the picture of a dramatically stenographic moment and suggests that these enigmas may have been “noted down at the spur of the moment upon the first convenient parchment by some fourteenth-century cleric fresh from a journey or from a glad round

²³ Wahlgren, “A Swedish–Latin Parallel.”

²⁴ Wahlgren, “A Swedish–Latin Parallel”, 244.

²⁵ For example, Gachanja and Kebaya, “Pedagogical aspects of Riddles.”

²⁶ In my experience, these recipes qua contests are created and executed exclusively by women belonging to small fundamentalist churches, and are always treated as being of a good-humoured, even jocular, nature, if with a mildly competitive character, part of which derives from the fact that performance, whether bleak or brilliant, is entirely a matter of self-reporting at, for example, Ladies’ Bible Study classes.

of story-telling with his brother-monks.”²⁷ Some centuries later, the fifteenth-century Old Swedish *Lilla rimkrönikan*, several manuscripts of which belonged to aristocratic families, display what appears to have been a basically competitive structure, which I have suggested might have been used in the fashion of the *Joca Monachorum* as a pedagogical tool, in this instance, for the purpose of creating an historical narrative for Sweden.²⁸

The parallel between these *Joca Monachorum*-type questions,²⁹ and the sort of question typical in Nordic wisdom contests raises interesting issues. Against questions of the type, “Who died but was not born?” the Eddic materials place similar questions about named figures from Norse mythology but lacking the “blocking element.” Thus, for example, *Vafþrúðnismál* 11, “Segðu mér, Gagnráðr [...] / hvé sá hestr heitir, er hverian dregr / dag of dróttmogo” (41) (Tell me, Gagnrad [...] what the horse is called who draws every / day to mankind), to which the answer is Scinfaxi.³⁰ *Alvíssmál* offers a more pointed comparison to the extent that it demands knowledge in the form of Þórr’s repeated, “Segðu mér þat, Alvíss” (109) (Tell me this, All-wise); however, although the god may challenge the dwarf’s knowledge, he never poses a question in such a way as to challenge his wit, simply giving the dwarf an opportunity to list a vast array of synonyms used among the various races of beings.

To be clear, I am *not* suggesting that the tradition we see in the Eddic materials necessarily derives from the Christian religious practice—it could have, after all being clever and knowledgeable in word and thought must have had its advantages in many cultural traditions—but after the Conversion, the existence both in the native vernacular tradition *and* in elite Latin culture of such mystery-oriented genres must have served to support the value of these traits in *both* traditions.

Old Norse Riddles in Context

Typically, medieval riddle traditions reflect to a high degree the writing of Symphosius, a late Classical author whose fifth-century collection of 100 riddles was deeply influential throughout the Middle Ages and formed the backdrop against which many of the so-called “literary riddles” in both Latin and the vernaculars were created. But Old Norse, as distinct from, say, Old English with which it so often otherwise shares literary characteristics, lacks any known large collection of “literary riddles.”³¹ Curiously, the only

²⁷ Wahlgren, “Swedish–Latin Parallel,” 244.

²⁸ Mitchell, “Literature in Medieval Sweden,” 44–45.

²⁹ Bjork, *Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, s.v.: “Written in the form of short questions and answers, these texts often play on biblical curiosities, and were meant to stimulate reflection and meditation via their relatively humorous presentation.” For Icelandic parallels, see Marchand, “Old Icelandic *Joca Monachorum*.”

³⁰ In citing Eddic poems, all references to the original text are to Neckel and Kuhn, *Edda*, vol. 1, and all translations are from Larrington, *Poetic Edda*.

³¹ Cf. the fourteenth-century Latin riddles noted above in Holm. B 59, on which, see also Geijer and Campbell, *Gátor*, and Wahlgren, “Swedish–Latin Parallel.” In addition, sporadic riddles appear, or have been detected, in a variety of contexts, including such disparate sources as runic inscriptions (for example, Eggja, Rök), Ragnar’s challenge to Kraka that she should come neither clothed

significant repository of “true riddles” in all of Old Norse poetry comes from *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, a “fornaldarsaga” generally thought to have been composed in the thirteenth century, and preserved in a variety of fourteenth-, fifteenth-, and seventeenth-century manuscripts, but also a text with occasionally very ancient roots.³² Some differences among the so-called H-, R- and U-traditions notwithstanding, the saga’s riddle contest is placed in all versions in a judicial-like context, namely that in the kingdom over which Heiðrekr rules, trials may be decided either by the king’s judges or by the accused tendering riddles to King Heiðrekr. If the king cannot solve the riddles, then the accused is to go free.

We are next told of the king’s foe (“mikill óvinr Heiðreks konungs” [32]),³³ Gestumblindi, who is called to the king’s court. Because he does not consider himself wise, Gestumblindi does not want to “skipta orðum við konunginn” (32) (exchange words with the king) and sacrifices to Óðinn, asking for help and making great promises.³⁴ A stranger subsequently arrives at his door, a stranger who says of himself that he too is named Gestumblindi. The two exchange clothes, and the new, recently arrived Gestumblindi makes his way to Heiðrekr, where the king and his guest engage in a wisdom contest consisting of riddles. And it is precisely in this context, that is when Gestumblindi, the disguised Óðinn, responds to Heiðrekr’s query as to whether he would rather ask riddles or leave it to the judges, that the god sets himself up to be in a position that guarantees his win: “‘Þat kýs ek,’ segir hann, ‘at bera fyrr upp gáturnar’”(32) (“I choose rather to propound riddles”).

Understandably, much of the attention given to this episode has focused on the nature of the roughly three-dozen riddles themselves, some of which appear to belong to the native tradition; in any event, at least six multiforms were later recorded from living oral tradition in Scandinavia.³⁵ For the most part, these riddles are as far from the *Joca Monachorum*-types as one could imagine, although there are variations in the texts (for example, the H-text is considerably chattier than the R-text and contains an additional seven riddles).³⁶

For our purposes here, I am not so concerned with the nature and origins of the riddles themselves as much as with the frame narrative, although it should also be noted that part of the frame concerns the manner in which the contest moves from

nor unclothed and so on in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, and the King Frothi section of Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum*. Cf. Heusler, “Die altnordischen Rätsel”; Alver, “Norrøne gæter fra mellomalderen”; Alver, “Gæter”; Mitchell, “Skírnir’s Other Journey”; and Rademann-Veith, *Die skandinavischen Rätselbücher*.

32 On this late medieval Icelandic genre and its relationship to Nordic traditions, see Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas*. The riddle contest in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* has been at the centre of scholarly debate on “literary riddles” and their function since at least Cailliois’s *Art Poétique*, in response to which, see Abrahams, “Literary Study of the Riddle.”

33 Unless otherwise noted, translations of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* are from Tolkien, *Saga Heiðreks Konungs ins vitra*, as are references to the text.

34 Tolkien, *Saga Heiðreks Konungs ins vitra*, 32; my translation.

35 Alver, “Gæter,” 649.

36 See Tolkien, *Saga Heiðreks Konungs ins vitra*, xviii–xxi; and, especially, Love, *Reception of Hervarar Saga ok Heiðreks*, 41–80, 190–238, and his extensive review of secondary literature.

ordinary-sounding riddles, albeit mostly *not* drawn from the stock of international folk and learned riddles, to the two final questions in the riddle session,³⁷ which deserve special attention as they presumably serve to bring the story back to local pre-Christian traditions:

Þá mælti Gestumblindi:

“Hverir eru þeir tveir,
er tíu hafa fœtr,
augu þrjú
ok einn hala?
Heiðrekr konungr,
hyggðu at gátu!”

“Þat er þá, er Óðinn ríðr Sleipni.”

Þá mælti Gestumblindi: “Segðu þat þá hinzt, ef þú ert hverjum
konungi vitrari”:

Hvat mælti Óðinn
í eyra Baldri,
áðr hann væri á bál hafðr?

Heiðrekr konungr segir, “Þat veiztu einn, rög vættr!” (44)

(Then said Gestumblindi:

“Who are those twain
that on ten feet run,
three their eyes are
but only one tail?
This riddle ponder,
O prince Heidrek!”

“Thus it is,” said the king, “when Óðinn rides upon Sleipnir.”

Then said Gestumblindi, “Tell me this then last of all, if you are
wiser than any other king”:

“What said Óðinn
in the ear of Balder,
before he was borne
to the fire?”

“You alone know that, vile creature!” cried King Heidrek.)

The riddle section of the saga is its most frequently duplicated and best-documented portion, and at the same time, it is also the most diverse portion with respect to treatment, with the order and even the substance of the riddles themselves differing dramatically in different manuscripts. Some aspects of *Gátur Gestumblinda* do not change, however, specifically the presence of these two riddles built entirely on various elements of Óðinn’s career which serve to direct the contest towards the personality of Óðinn; neither their essential nature nor their positions among the riddles changes in any of the manuscripts of the saga, always representing the penultimate and *ultima* riddles. The function of these enigmas, as Love notes, is to underscore that Heiðrekr’s demise

37 The distinction is often made between “incidental riddling” and “session riddling,” on which, see, for example, Goldstein, “Riddling Traditions”; and Burns, “Riddling.”

requires supernatural intervention.³⁸ And, of course, as all observers have noted, the last query is only riddle-like insofar as it poses a quintessentially occult, or secret, question amidst many true riddles;³⁹ moreover, it asks for exactly the same answer as the same contestant, Óðinn, poses as the *ultima* question in the wisdom contest between himself and Vafþrúðnir in *Vafþrúðnismál*, a query which by its nature is unfair, and by definition, not a normal riddle, since only Óðinn himself can possibly know the answer.⁴⁰

In the case of *Vafþrúðnismál*, this trick question appears to trump the knowledgeable disgorging of information that has preceded it, and the giant concedes, “þú ert æ vísastr vera” (49) (you’ll always be the wisest of beings). Earlier in the poem (v. 7), Vafþrúðnir suggests that his guest will not leave alive unless he proves himself to be wiser (“snotari”) than his host, and Vafþrúðnir’s last utterance uses the phrase “feigom munni mæltu ec” (with doomed mouth I’ve spoken); given those comments, as well as the theme of the poem, most scholars assume that the unseen conclusion to the poem is the death of the giant.⁴¹

In *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, the outcome is more certain, if not as immediate: on being faced with the same question, albeit packaged differently, and reaching the same conclusion, Heiðrekr attempts to kill Óðinn with his sword but fails, after which, Óðinn remarks that because Heiðrekr has tried to kill him without cause (“saklausan”), Heiðrekr will die at the hands of “inir verstu þrælar” (44) (the worst thralls). And so, some time later, King Heiðrekr is indeed killed by escaping slaves whom he had earlier captured.

Wit, Wisdom, and Winning: Old Norse Verbal Duals Writ Large

It is, of course, the way in which the wisdom confrontations function in *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* that excites our interest here. In one of the more interesting essays to take up the social function of kennings, Lindow draws an analogy between skaldic poetry and what linguists refer to as a “secret language” within the “drótt,” or chieftain’s retinue, showing as he writes, that, “in folkloristic terms, skalds were active tradition bearers, other members of the *drótt* passive tradition bearers, and the tradition itself was limited to the *drótt*: non-members were outside the tradition.”⁴² In other words, the peculiar diction of skaldic poetry functioned at one level as a method for communicating meaning in an aesthetic form, but it also functioned, and perhaps even

38 Love, *Reception of Hervarar Saga ok Heiðreks*.

39 Two opposing views on riddle function have developed of which the following may be considered representative: Abrahams, “Literary Study of the Riddle,” 196, “[t]hus, at the heart of riddling is the contest motive, and this means in most cases that the *agon* occurs in the area of wits rather than knowledge,” and Haring, “On Knowing the Answer,” 197, “African riddling is more like a catechism than a creative inquiry. Usually in African riddles the connection between question and answer is fixed by tradition and popular acceptance.”

40 This type of riddle is often referred to as a Samson riddle, as it relies on knowledge known only to that individual, or a neck riddle, since the speaker frequently “saves his neck” through its use.

41 See, for example, Ármann Jakobsson, “Contest of Cosmic Fathers.”

42 Lindow, “Riddles, Kennings,” 353.

primarily functioned, as a method for communicating and reifying social hierarchies and social rules, that is who belonged and who did not, at first to the “drótt” and later to the “hirð” (court).⁴³

Lindow’s interesting observations about the extra-linguistic and specifically social dimensions of the practice of skaldic poetry—performances that are, for us as modern observers in any event, defined by their linguistic properties, their stylized declamations, and by such additional goals as poetic competition, and performances that are at the same time highly sociological in their purpose—encourage me to think about this situation elsewhere with regard to the Nordic riddle and its nearest kindred among Nordic literary genres.⁴⁴ As we have seen, for a century that relationship has generally been assumed to be the province of skaldic poetry; however, we should consider the possibility that there may be Old Norse genres in addition to skaldic poetry which perhaps deserve closer scrutiny *vis-à-vis* the riddle, the *Joca Monachorum*, and its Eddic equivalent, the wisdom contest, genres that also use “coded languages” in performances where challenges based on verbal exchanges posed serially by turns test the opponent’s wits and, thus, likewise establish social hierarchies and reaffirm social rules.⁴⁵

Although of a very different character than the riddle, two Old Norse genres, the “senna” and the “mannajafnaðr,” are, I believe, their differences notwithstanding, apt genres for comparison.⁴⁶ These ritualized forms of verbal aggression are typified by their competitive use of language in specific marked social contexts, and are Nordic manifestations of a widely known form of competitive speech act where language can play a central role in escalating and de-escalating social conflict in structured public display venues. They offer a window on how, to whom, and under what circumstances Old Norse sub-cultures gave individuals permission to exchange powerful invectives. Parallel examples, as is well-known, come from a variety of traditions, for example medieval Italian, Middle English, Scottish, Turkish, Anlo-Ewe and other sub-Saharan African, and modern American traditions.⁴⁷

43 Both “drótt” and “hirð” refer to a chieftain’s retinue or troops, but with an increasingly institutionalized sense over time; see Lindow, *Comitatus*.

44 Cf. Mitchell, “Performance and Norse Poetry,” 187–91.

45 Cf. Goldstein’s description, “Riddling Traditions,” 331, of the contest and performance aspects of a “riddling session” in the Aberdeenshire area of Scotland in the late 1950s: “in riddling sessions the riddler poses his riddle and usually sits back while his audience puzzles over the enigma. One or more members of the audience will make attempts at guessing the solution and, usually failing to come up with the correct answer, will turn to the riddler for the solution. The audience will then comment on the qualities of the riddle—how good, bad, or indifferent it was.”

46 For an orientation to these forms, see especially Harris, “The *senna*”; Swenson, *Performing Definitions*; Bax and Padmos, “Two Types of Verbal Dueling”; and Bax and Padmos, “Senna and mannajafnaðr.” On the application of performance and other ethnographically informed approaches to the study of Old Norse literature, see the review in Hermann, “Methodological Challenges.” I take this opportunity to thank the members of a folklore seminar at Harvard in the spring 2014 semester entitled, *Maledicta: Ritualized Verbal Abuse*, for their lively and thought-provoking discussions which helped formulate my thinking here.

47 Much has been written on these topics, to say the least. Regarded today as essentially canonical

These competitive verbal exchanges go far back in written records: in Europe that means such famous texts as the Old Icelandic *Lokasenna*, the Middle English *Owl and the Nightengale*, and Montgomerie's early modern Scottish flyting;⁴⁸ from Africa, there are nineteenth-century reports of such traditions, as well as strong and famous living traditions of ritualized invectives among, for example, the Anlo-Ewe; and with the European slave trade of the colonial period, the tradition was apparently introduced into the New World, where it lives on under a variety of names, for example, the dozens, soundings, snaps, cuts.⁴⁹ In his seminal article on "senna," Joseph Harris suggested that we consider the genre as something of an "applied sounding."⁵⁰

Under the influence of Foley's ground-breaking use of new media in the web-based corollary to his *How to Read an Oral Poem*,⁵¹ I note that in the modern globalized media environment it is very likely that the African-American sounding or dozens will be best known to readers from its commercial successes on niche cable programming where the genre has been exploited and popularized (for example *In Living Color* or *Yo Mama*).⁵² Watching these commercially produced sketches, one readily perceives the relative lack of spontaneity in the exchanges, and what these "snaps" gain in relative clarity is, I would suggest, lost by their unnatural and staged character. By contrast, watching performances in less media-staged environments is highly enlightening: thus, a short video of two young boys,⁵³ perhaps five years old or so, learning and embracing the tradition ("doing the dozens"), and being encouraged, egged on even, by the crowd listening eagerly to the formalized insults exchanged by turn, is, in my view, an excellent way to envision the type of performance contexts on which are founded all the different wit-

are Abrahams, "Playing the Dozens"; Dundes, Leach, and Özkök, "Strategy of Turkish Boys' Verbal Dueling Rhymes"; and Labov, *Language in the Inner City*, 287–353; among the very best treatments are Parks, "Flyting, Sounding, Debate"; and Parks, *Verbal Dueling*, while comprehensive considerations are provided in Neu, *Sticks and Stones*, and Wald, *Dozens*.

48 M. Olsen, *Lokasenna*; Stanley, *Owl and the Nightingale*; Parkinson, *Montgomerie's Poems*.

49 Dollard, "Dozens"; Abrahams, "Playing the Dozens"; Wald, *Dozens*.

50 Harris, "The senna."

51 <http://www.oraltradition.org/hrop/>, accessed July 8, 2016: "The site has been designed to offer examples and additional information that are best presented via the web, the kinds of materials that don't fit comfortably between the covers of a conventional book. In this sense we're trying to take advantage of both media—book and web—and to underline the kinship between oral poetry and the Internet (a subject discussed in *How to Read an Oral Poem*)." [Editor's note: while the journal *OT* is now housed at Harvard University, the online materials from the University of Missouri's Center for Studies in Oral Tradition, including the url cited above, will remain at the University of Missouri where they are in the process of being migrated to the MOSpace Institutional Repository. MOSpace is available to the public at <https://mospace.umsystem.edu/xmlui/>. As of January 31, 2020, only a portion of the materials contained in the CSOT site have yet been made available.]

52 A sense of these commercial ventures can be had from, for example, the early 1990s television show, Fox's "In Living Color," of which the following, accessed July 8, 2016, would be typical: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-t02cFpOUo>. "The Best on MTV's 'Yo Momma,'" YouTube Video, 2:31. May 22, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nKTVLeUpnTw>.

53 "doing the dozens," YouTube Video, 2:39. Accessed July 3, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GEZA50XB9aE&list=PL5_RvGLQ7fbhWWtaA68DMfN3FXkSsLCLY.

based, enacted, formal oral competition genres we know in the North: “mannajafnaðr,” “senna,” riddle contests, *Joca Monachorum*, and so on.

These playfully charged and spontaneous exchanges, if at the same time also staged and learned in a different sense, replete with shouted encouragements from the crowd (“work his ass,” and so on), may seem out of place to those who want to preserve the perception of a grave dignity surrounding the performance of Eddic poetry and other Norse literary forms; however, I think that the spirit of this ribald video (“doing the dozens”) may be of equal significance for our understanding of competitive verbal art as are, say, the fifth-century riddles of Symphosius. In many social contexts today, riddling is a largely cerebral activity, but as has been observed of children employing riddling to test social competence and reify hierarchies in contemporary settings, what has been called “contentious riddling” can involve highly aggressive behaviour.⁵⁴ Among other things, such real-life performances underscore that the goal of competitive events of these sorts is winning, claiming victory in a competitive speech act, and a key ingredient of such triumph is the defeat, humiliation even, of the opponent, and to that extent, judgments and declarations of victory depend on audiences, onlookers, whether the gods feasting in Ægir’s hall in *Lokasenna*, the members of the “drótt” envisioned as listening to a complex use of kennings in a skaldic poem, the listeners of a riddle contest between the king and Gestumblindi in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, or even young men gleefully shouting “work his ass.”

Postlude

None of the suggestions above about riddling and verbal aggression in Old Norse can, as far as I can make out, be subjected to empirical testing. If, on the one hand, readers are willing to accept “argument by analogy” as a useful tool in humanistic discussions, then I believe the perspectives offered here open new avenues for understanding both the value and the operational aspects of verbal confrontations in Viking-Age and early-medieval Scandinavia, a matter reflected in the heavily stylized surviving textual materials. If, on the other hand, some readers find it possible *only* to believe what can with absolute certainty be identified in the existing written words of the medieval texts rather than inferred from them, then we are left with little more to consider as regards the riddle in the medieval Nordic world than a handful of modestly interesting codicological observations on the history of the few Nordic texts that take up riddles and other relevant matters.

The price paid for that sort of absolute fidelity to the existing texts strikes me as being very, very high, and as the scholar to whom the works in this volume are dedicated made abundantly clear in his own research,⁵⁵ “argument by analogy” can be an extremely valuable and productive method. In contrast to a deadening intellectual minimalism, Foley’s approach was one that could be characterized, as he himself once remarked in a different context, as “much less predetermined and far more interactive, emergent, and

⁵⁴ McDowell, *Children’s Riddling*.

⁵⁵ For example Foley, *Oral Tradition and the Internet*.

performative.”⁵⁶ Certainly, it offers a productive pathway for considering verbal aggression in the medieval Nordic world, one of which I suspect John himself would approve.

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56 Quoted in Roth, “Between OT and IT.”

