

PERFORMANCE ARCHAEOLOGY, *EIRÍKSMÁL*, *HÁKONARMÁL*, AND THE STUDY OF OLD NORDIC RELIGIONS*

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THIS VOLUME IS dedicated to the memory of the late, sadly-missed John Miles Foley, and it is fitting that this article should begin with a quotation from Foley's *How to Read an Oral Poem*. As with so much of what Foley wrote, the quotation is highly astute. I have regularly used it because it sums up almost everything I have ever wanted to stress about the key differences between oral and written poetry and the ways in which they function and are received:

Any oral poem, like any utterance, is profoundly contingent on its context. To assume that it is detachable—that we can comfortably speak of “an oral poem” as a freestanding item—is necessarily to take it out of context. And what is the lost context? It is the performance, the audience, the poet, the music, the specialized way of speaking, the gestures, the costuming, the visual aids, the occasion, the ritual, and myriad other aspects of the given poem's reality [...]. And when we pry an oral poem out of one language and insert it into another, things will inevitably change. We'll pay a price.¹

What Foley is referring to when he discusses “the lost context” is the element of *performance*, something that many of us, be we scholars of literature or scholars dealing with history, religion, or archaeology, often forget when we are engaged with our studies focusing on ancient texts and objects. After all, many of us first encountered these once-living sources as static pieces viewed out of context in libraries and museums, pinned down for examination like butterflies in a biology exhibition. While we might give a brief passing salute to the idea that this material might have had roots in the oral tradition, living ritual, or entertainment, and to the idea that it led a long and meaningful life before it reached its present situation, we rarely give much detailed thought to exactly *how* the texts and objects in question might have originally functioned—or performed—in a wider context. Such considerations are commonly dismissed as belonging to the realm of light speculation, and what we are supposed to deal with as scholars are *facts*. The problem, nonetheless, is that when it comes down to it, many of the “facts” in question are a little like the remains of the party one encounters the morning after: the dirty dishes and glasses, or the Christmas tree rolling down the road on 7 January. These are certainly facts, but we might remember that what was most important for those involved was not the dirty dishes, the dead tree, or even the old wrapping paper, but the

* This paper was first presented in a session dedicated to the memory of John Miles Foley at the 48th International Congress on Medieval Studies, in Kalamazoo, Michigan, May 10, 2013. The ideas in the article, completed soon afterwards, have since been effectively followed up by Nygaard, see especially 147–227, in his 2019 PhD dissertation, “Poetry as Ritual,” and somewhat earlier, by Millward in her 2014 MA thesis, “Skaldic Slam.”

1 Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem*, 60.

party itself, in other words, the happening that gave them meaning. We might bear in mind that it is the “happening” that we are tending to ignore when we concentrate on the dirty glasses and the bones of the turkey: in short, while we may well be concentrating on facts, these are facts which have been taken out of their key functional context as part of a performative life. And even though the performance has disappeared, it still needs to be borne in mind if we are ever to make any real sense of what has been left behind.

The Performance Studies approach that I have tended to take over the years with regard to the Eddic poems preserved in early medieval Iceland has underlined that consideration of the *shared experience* that preceded the remaining “facts” matters a great deal for the way in which the facts in question are understood.² This applies especially when dealing with poems like the Eddic and skaldic poems which once lived within the oral tradition, and not least if we wish to understand the nature of the phenomenon that the “original” work might have been and how it *functioned* in society. Rather than merely concentrating on the structure and colours of the dead butterfly, there is good reason to consider its flight and the effects it had on those who observed it.

The Performance Studies approach under discussion here is one that has been effectively advocated by scholars like Richard Schechner, and emphasizes, among other things, that we should consider the nature of our *own* living experiences when analyzing the nature of earlier oral work that has been performed and later recorded.³ The approach certainly seems to demonstrate that with a little application of thought drawn from the multiplicity of our own experiences, some of the valuable missing context surrounding ancient oral remains can be resurrected. As a folklore colleague from Sweden, Owe Ronström, informed my students recently, such an approach prioritizes “how,” “why,” or “what for” over “what.”⁴ Equally important, by prioritizing *experience* over remains, this approach helps to focus the spotlight on a number of new important questions that we often forget when poring over those dead butterflies in the silent air-conditioned museum (or library), where food, drink, dance, music, battle, ritual, masks, and blood sacrifice tend to be frowned on.

There is too little space here to give a detailed overview of the Performance Studies approach to oral texts. Suffice to say it has grown out of an amalgamation of various interdisciplinary approaches relating to performance and drama, starting with the somewhat obvious realization that in any dramatic performance, the written text is only a small part of the wider “text” received by audiences which, as Foley notes (see above), will naturally include the stage setting and lighting, the positioning of actors, their appearances, their movement, gesture and expression, as well as tonal and rhyth-

2 Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*; Gunnell, “*Hof, Halls*”; Gunnell, “‘Til holts ek gekk’”; Gunnell, “Narratives, Space, and Drama”; Gunnell, “Performance of the Poetic Edda”; Gunnell, “Drama of the Poetic Edda”; Gunnell, “*Völuspá* in Performance”; Gunnell, “Masks and Performance”; Gunnell, “Eddic Performance”; Gunnell, “Ritual”; Gunnell, “Performance Studies”; and Gunnell, “Ritual.”

3 Schechner, *Environmental Theater*; Schechner, *Essays on Performance Theory*; Schechner, *Between Theory and Anthropology*; Schechner, *Performance Theory*; Schechner, *The Future of Ritual*; Schechner, “Fundamentals of Performance Studies”; Schechner, *Over, Under, and Around*; and Schechner, *Performance Studies*.

4 See further Gunnell and Ronström, “Folklore och Performance Studies,” 34.

mic aspects and other sensual signals including smell, touch, and even taste in some cases.⁵ Over and above this, we have the wider framework of the theatre space itself, the social situation at the time, and the audience's own background knowledge and expectations, as well as the degree to which the performance was safely separated from the day-to-day life of the audience. This experiential approach was then applied to Erving Goffman's argument that all encounters between people in everyday life can be analyzed from such a viewpoint "as" performance.⁶ Further application came from J. L. Austin's ideas of performativity;⁷ Johan Huizinga's work on the nature of play;⁸ the key work of the Lord-Parry-Foley school analyzing the ways in which oral poetry was composed and performed;⁹ the arguments put forward by Victor Turner and others about the nature of ritual performance;¹⁰ and the considerations of the social-linguistic Labov-Hymes-Bauman school of performance, which focused on careful discourse analysis of oral narrative events.¹¹ Placed alongside each other on a shelf, these works provide a range of very useful tools for analyzing "what's going on" in any given oral performance over and above the text—in short, a range of different ways to examine not only living performance, but also the "lost" original "context" that would have accompanied the early oral performance of works that are now only extant in writing.

As the quotation by Foley cited above underlines, there are numerous reasons for considering oral poems or oral narratives in the same way that we consider dramatic performances. Both work on their audiences in a very similar way. Indeed, the dividing line between the two forms as types of performance is very unclear, as one can see in modern stand-up routines or many types of slam poetry.¹² Furthermore, as Schechner points out, in functional terms, all performances will position themselves somewhere on a dyad between ritual and play, in other words, between long-term efficacy and pure entertainment.¹³ They are similarly both types of "restored behaviour" in different degrees, employing a range of cultural building-blocks known and understood by the audience.¹⁴ Both centre on a performer, an audience, and something that is performed; and quite naturally both involve not only the performance itself, but a period of prepa-

5 See further Gunnell, "Narratives, Space, and Drama"; Gunnell, "Introduction"; and Pfister, *Theory and Analysis of Drama*, 8.

6 Goffman, *Presentation of Self*; and Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 38–45.

7 Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*.

8 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*.

9 Lord, *Singer of Tales*; Foley, *Oral-Formulaic Theory*; Foley, *Theory of Oral Composition*; Foley, *Traditional Oral Epic*; Foley, *Immanent Art*; Foley, *Singer of Tales In Performance*; Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem*; and Foley, *Wedding*.

10 See, for example, Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*.

11 See, for example, Labov, *Language in the Inner City*; Hymes, *Foundations in Sociolinguistics*; Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance*; Bauman, *Story, Performance, and Event*; Bauman, "Contextualization, Tradition"; and Bauman and Braid, "Ethnography of Performance."

12 See further, Millward, "Skaldic Slam."

13 Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 49, 79–80.

14 Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 28–29.

ration beforehand (which might include training, rehearsal, and/or composition), and then a period afterwards which will range from performance “cool-down” to long-term influences on the society at large.¹⁵ These are approaches that Foley was already beginning to apply to his own considerations of how oral poetry functions in time and space.

A natural reaction might be to question the degree to which such an approach can be applied to early medieval poetry. In the case of medieval drama, there are numerous additional documents and even illustrations informing later researchers about the nature of the performances of these early plays. Information concerning the performance of early poetry is much more fragmentary, especially in the north.¹⁶ Outside the brief descriptions in the sagas (recorded some two or three hundred years after the event), in most cases all that remains are the manuscripts containing the poems in which sound has been transposed into ink on parchment. Nonetheless, with its emphasis on the experience and activity that lies behind texts and objects, Performance Studies opens some valuable doors as a means of approaching this material. Most important, it underlines the need to consider early texts like archaeological remains, in other words, as something that originally gained meaning from the ways in which they interacted with people and space. The Performance Studies approach reminds us that before they came to be recorded, these texts, like dramas, were originally conceived, performed, and received in the form of sound (rather than writing), and that for their audiences they were associated with a range of senses and memories, and existed as part of a process in time and space, like everything that we hear and touch in our own lives. The approach suggests that with a little application of knowledge gained from personal experience, these poems (like other archaeological objects) *can* be brought back to life, and indeed, that they *should* be analyzed by researchers in the context of the live performances with which they were originally associated (rather than merely as a form of written literature).

This is an approach I have referred to earlier as “performance archaeology.”¹⁷ It can obviously be effectively applied to unambiguous performances of pagan ritual described in the sagas and other external accounts, such as the account of the seeress Þorbjörg lítilvölva’s magical “varðlokk” ritual described in *Eiríks saga rauða*;¹⁸ Ibn Fadlān’s account of the Rus boat funeral on the Volga;¹⁹ Constantine Porphyrogenitus’s account of the masked Gothikon presented by Nordic warriors at the Byzantine court

¹⁵ Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 225–49.

¹⁶ On Anglo-Saxon Poetry, see further Opland, *Anglo-Saxon Oral Poetry*; on skaldic poetry, see Gade, “Recitation of Old Norse Skaldic Poetry”; on Eddic poetry see Lönnroth, “Hjálmar’s Death Song”; Harris, “Eddic Poetry as Oral Poetry”; Harris, “Performance of Old Norse Eddic Poetry”; Harris, “Ethnopaaleography”; Heimer Pálsson, “Performance of the Eddic Poems”; and Gunnell, “Performance of the Poetic Edda”; for one of the most detailed accounts see Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Unger, *Norna Gests þátr*.

¹⁷ See, for example, Gunnell, “Masks and Performance,” 189; and Gunnell and Ronström, “Folklore och Performance Studies,” 54–55.

¹⁸ Einar Ólafur Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, *Eiríks saga rauða*, 206–9; and Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*, 335–38.

¹⁹ Ibn Fadlān, *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness*, 49–54; and Price, “Passing into Poetry.”

in Constantinople;²⁰ Adam of Bremen's account of the annual pagan festival that used to take place at Gamla Uppsala in Sweden;²¹ Tacitus's account of the procession of the goddess Nerthus;²² or that of the fertility ritual described in *Völva þáttur*.²³ Each of these accounts describes ritual performances of some kind, and each deserves to be examined first and foremost from the viewpoint of performance and *experience*. They are also given new dimensions if placed in association with visual depictions such as those showing what seem to be ritual activities on the Torslunda helmet dies or the Oseberg tapestries;²⁴ or with archaeological remains such as those of the Oseberg ship burial; or if they are examined in the context of the work of place-name scholars such as Stefan Brink, who has demonstrated how the Nordic landscape "performed" as part of interaction with people;²⁵ or archaeologists like Neil Price and Paul Mortimer, who have recently illustrated how a helmet can be viewed as a mask which created its own performance wherever it went.²⁶

Accounts of ritual and archaeological objects directly associated with ritual or depicting ritualistic performances are comparatively easy to approach from a performance viewpoint, not least because they are shown to *be* performances (each has an obvious audience, an obvious set of performers, and an obvious performance space). What then can be done with "archaeological texts" like the two skaldic poems I mean to consider below, namely *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*, both of which were supposedly composed before the advent of Christianity in Scandinavia, and were later preserved in manuscripts written in the early thirteenth century?²⁷ Whether we believe these works were actually "pagan" or not, the first thing to remember is that, as noted above, those who composed the earliest versions of the Eddic and skaldic poems, and those who passed them on in one form or another for centuries until they were eventually recorded, never conceived of these works as *written* texts. They were viewed as entities meant to be received through the medium of rhythmic meaningful *sound* in a given space and before a recognized audience that brought shared knowledge with them to the performance in question. To deny that they should therefore also be examined in that form is the equivalent of continuing to examine the dead Christmas tree mentioned above without considering its connections to Christmas. Such an approach might well be speculative, but when it comes down to it, most of our work with ancient materials tends to involve a great deal of speculation. In the very least, considering how these works might have worked as performances means attempting to examine the materials in the form and context in which they were intended. Indeed, given the fact that archae-

20 Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*, 72–76.

21 Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis*, 259–60; Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops*, 207–8; and Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*, 78–80.

22 Tacitus, *Germania*, 146–47.

23 Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Unger, *Völva þáttur*.

24 See Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*, 60–71.

25 Brink, "Mythologizing Landscape."

26 Price and Mortimer, "An Eye for Odin?"; see also Gunnell, "Masks and Performance."

27 See Jón Helgason, *Skjaldevers*, 8–9, 21, 24; Fulk, *Eiríksmál*, 1003; and Fulk, *Háskonamál*, 171–72.

ology is annually providing ever more contextual knowledge about the surroundings in which poetic performances would have taken place in the Nordic world, it is always getting easier to place these works in some form of living context, and consider exactly how they might have functioned in the society within which they were presented.

I have earlier used the performance approach with some of the Eddic poems, such as *Skírnismál*, *Fáfnismál*, *Hárbarðsljóð*, *Lokasenna*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál*, and *Brymskviða*, many of which take the form of monologues and dialogues.²⁸ I have also recently used it with *Völuspá*, arguing that the approach in question suggests the poem was designed to invoke a musical audio-visual mythical experience for an audience that inhabited a very un-Icelandic, military, Óðinnic space.²⁹ In this present article I mean to venture somewhat tentatively into the field of skaldic poetry. My belief is that a performance-related examination of *Eiríksmál* (most particularly) and *Hákonarmál* has a great deal to tell us about why these poems were created, why they have their extant form, and how they might have “worked” (and been intended to “work”) in performance.

Of course, in their present form, both works take the eternally silent form of ink signs on paper. These are updated versions of the earlier ink signs that were traced across two main skin manuscripts from the thirteenth century (*Fagrskinna* and *Kringla*), works which were later transposed onto the seventeenth-century paper copies which form the basis of the editions most of us know today.³⁰ There is little question that the extant

²⁸ See Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*; Gunnell, “‘Til hólts ek gekk’”; Gunnell, “Drama of the Poetic Edda”; Gunnell, “Eddic Performance”; and Gunnell, “Performance Studies.”

²⁹ See further Gunnell, “*Völuspá* in Performance.”

³⁰ On the manuscripts, see Jón Helgason, *Skjaldevers*, 8–9, 21, and 24; Fulk, *Eiríksmál*, 1003–5; and Fulk, *Hákonarmál*, 171–75. The *Fagrskinna* manuscript was written ca. 1220, and destroyed in the fire of Copenhagen in 1728. It now only exists in paper copies from the late seventeenth century: see Finnur Jónsson, *Fagrskinna*, i; Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 36. *Eiríksmál* (which is not named in the manuscript) is contained as a whole in this manuscript (Finnur Jónsson, *Fagrskinna*, 27–30; Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 58–59 [ch. 7]). Two sections of what is now called *Hákonarmál* (also unnamed in *Fagrskinna*) are given in two parts in this manuscript, strophes 1–4 (strophes that are directly attributed to a poem by Eyvindr “skáldaspillir” Finnsson about Hákon’s death, describing how the valkyjur Göndul and Skögul visited the battlefield) appearing in chap. 11 (Finnur Jónsson, *Fagrskinna*, 38–39; Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 66–68), while strophes 5–7 (unattributed to any poet, and giving further description of the battle) and strophes 19–21 (the eulogy to Hákon which ends the extant poem, here again attributed to Eyvindr “skáldaspillir” Finnsson, but nothing being stated about their association to the previously quoted strophes) follow separately in chap. 12 (Finnur Jónsson, *Fagrskinna*, 41–42, 48; Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 66–68 and 72–73). The *Kringla* manuscript which contained Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla* (written ca. 1220–1235) was also from the mid-thirteenth century, and was similarly lost in the fire (except for one leaf [Reykjavík, National and University Library of Iceland, Lbs fragm 82]). The extant manuscripts are paper copies from the seventeenth century. *Hákonarmál* (now named) appears as a whole in *Hákonar saga góða* in *Heimskringla* (which makes no mention of *Eiríksmál*), strophes 2–4 and 5–6 appearing first separately in chap. 30 (now attributed to Eyvindr). The whole (named) poem (with abbreviations for strophes already quoted and directly attributed to Eyvindr) is then given in chap. 32 (see Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 1:186–88 and 1:193–97; and Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, or *The Lives of the Norse Kings*, 97 and 99–101. Strophe 1 of *Eiríksmál* (now named as a poem but with no mention of an author) is quoted in Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda* (*Skáldskaparmál*) from the early thirteenth century (see Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, 10). Strophes 1, 14 and part of strophe 4 of

strophes of these poems are probably fragments of longer works. These fragments have also been edited by a number of different scholars over time (including Snorri Sturluson), most of whom had some form of educated Christian background.³¹ There is, however, equally little question that the fragments in question must be the recorded remains of oral texts which probably changed in some degree as they were passed on between people over time. The prose introductions given to the poems in the saga texts in which they have been preserved certainly shows that thirteenth-century oral tradition accredited both works to early tenth-century Norwegian poets,³² suggesting that those who recorded the poems believed that they had an ancient history. Their comments imply that the original composition of these works—however much they may have changed over time after that—was beyond personal memory and already part of legend.³³ None-

Hákonarmál (unnamed) appear in the same work (Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, 8 and 102), once again attributed directly to Eyvindr. On both poems, see further Sahlgren, *Eddica et Skaldica*; Hollander, “Is the *Lay of Eric* a Fragment?”; Harris, “*Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*”; Nordberg, *Krigarna i Odins sal*, 48–56; and Nygaard, “Poetry as Ritual,” 147–226. In this article, quotations from the two poems are taken from Jón Helgason, *Skjaldevers*. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. For more recent editions of the poems, along with other translations, see Fulk, *Eiríksmál* and Fulk, *Hákonarmál*.

31 This would seem to apply particularly to Snorri Sturluson’s edition of *Hákonarmál* which in *Fagrskinna* is presented in fragments not all of which are all said to come from the same (unnamed) poem; see above, n. 30. As noted below in n. 34, unlike most of *Eiríksmál*, the extant *Hákonarmál* uses a variety of forms of verse and both scenes of direct speech (not quoted in *Fagrskinna*) and third-person descriptions. There would thus seem to be some reason to question whether all of these strophes originated in the same poem. See further Sahlgren, *Eddica et Skaldica*.

32 *Fagrskinna*, chap. 7, states that “Eptir fall Eiríks let Gunnilldr yrkia kvæðe um hann. sva sem Óðinn fagnaðe hanum i Valholl oc hæfr sva” (After [King] Eiríkr’s death, [his mother] Gunnhildr had a poem composed for him, [which was] as if Óðinn was receiving him in Valhöll, and starts like this) (Finnur Jónsson, *Fagrskinna*, 27; see also Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 58). The “as if” element is worth bearing in mind, and recurs four chapters later (chap. 11), when strophes 1–4 of the *Hákonarmál* are preceded by the following introduction: “sem Oyvindr sægir i kvæðe þui er hann orte æftir fall Haconar. oc sætti hann þat æftir þui sem Gunnilldr hafðe latet yrkia um Æirik sun sinn sem Oðen byði hanum hæim til Valhallar. oc sægir hann marga atburði i kvæðeno fra orrastunni. oc hæfr sva” (as Eyvindr says in the poem he composed after the death of Hákon. He built it on the model of that which Gunnhildr had composed about Eiríkr her son, as [if] Óðinn invited him home to Valhöll, and he tells in the poem about many events from the battle, and starts like this) (Finnur Jónsson, *Fagrskinna*, 38; see also Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 66). In *Heimskringla*, 1:193, before quoting the whole poem, Snorri Sturluson writes: “Mæltu þeir svá fyrir grepti hans sem heiðinna manna siðr var til, vísuðu honum til Valhallar. Eyvindr skáldaspillir orti kvæði eitt um fall Hákonar konungs ok svá þat, hversu honum var fagnat. Þat eru kǫlluð Hákonarmál, ok er þetta upphaf” (They then spoke at his burial in accordance with pagan custom, and showed him the way to Valhöll. Eyvindr “skáldaspillir” composed a poem after the death of King Hákon and on how he was praised. It is called *Hákonarmál*, and this is the start of it).

33 It should be stressed that when the word “original” is used in this article, it refers to the work of the poet (working in an oral tradition) who composed the first version of those works later referred to as *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*, bearing in mind the fact that over the course of what may well be centuries of oral transmission (if we can trust the earlier-noted legends about them), the works will have altered to some extent, with some strophes dropped or added and others changed. The extant written versions may naturally also involve some degree of editorial emendation, as has been noted elsewhere.

theless, on the basis of what remains, it seems that the largely dialogic form of *Eiríksmál* (and much of *Hákonarmál*) must have been a deliberate decision on the part of the original composers. The same applies to the use of first-person direct speech in general (rather than reported words or descriptions), and the choice to use the *ljóðahátt* metre, which in the Eddic poems (outside strophe 5 of *Vafþrúðnismál*) is restricted to mythological dialogues and monologues, most of which seem to be pre-Christian.³⁴ The choice of setting and subject matter of both poems (which, as the saga introductions of both poems notes, were meant to focus on the glorious admittance of two pagan Norwegian kings to Valhöll³⁵) was obviously another central theme of these works from the start. All of these features make it unlikely that the original works were Christian creations.

The above considerations raise the question of the original functions of these works: were they designed merely as a form of entertainment? It should always be borne in mind that poems are kept alive in the oral tradition because they have a function and value. This function, however, may be very different from the original function that the poems had, which will have defined both form and subject matter. In the case of the poems noted above, they have been preserved in *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* for their value as historical sources. Individual strophes are then quoted (out of context) in Snorri's *Poetic Edda* for their poetic merit. Nonetheless, it should never be forgotten

34 In *Eiríksmál*, strophes 3–6 and 8–9 are clearly in *ljóðahátt* metre (suggesting that this was the original metre of the poem), the poem taking the form of pure first-person dialogue (except for the speaker indications like those noted in n. 41 below, which would appear to be additional even though they are in the main body of the text). *Hákonarmál* in its extant form is composed of a mixture of *málahátt* and *ljóðahátt* metre. Strophe 1 (describing how Óðinn sends Göndul and Skögun to the battlefield) is in *ljóðahátt*, as is the conversation between Hákon and the *valkyrjur* that have come to collect him on the battlefield (strophes 10–13), and the scenes describing Hákon's arrival in Valhöll (strophes 14–21), half of which (strophes 14–17) largely take the form of first-person speech. Elsewhere, however, the normal rules of *ljóðahátt* appear to be broken, since the metre is also used for past tense, third-person narrative, both full strophes (as in strophes 1, 11, and 18–21), and individual lines or verse-halves indicating speakers (strophes 10, 12–15, and 16 [although there is good reason to believe some of the speaker indications are additional to the poem]). The fact that none of the direct speech strophes are quoted in *Fagrskinna* gives further reason to consider whether the extant version of the poem deviates from that which was originally composed, which, as noted in n. 32, was apparently meant to take a similar form to *Eiríksmál* (which, as noted, is wholly dialogic and describes an arrival in Valhöll), whether it involved a mixture of metres and both dialogue and third-person narrative from the start, or whether the extant poem is actually a mixture of two poems. As should be apparent from the above, the argument that the poet uses *ljóðahátt* for speech and *málahátt* for third-person narrative (see, for example, Snorri Sturlson, *Heimskringla*, 1:193n2) does not hold. As Heusler, "Altnordische Dichtung" and Andersson, *Legend of Brynhild*, 92–93, have shown with regard to *Reginismál* and *Fáfnismál*, the blending of two poems of different metres also seems to have taken place in some parts of the extant Eddic collection. See further Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*, 185–96.

35 See n. 32 on how Eyvindr "skáldaspillir" apparently intended to follow the model of *Eiríksmál*. As noted above, while *Eiríksmál* takes place solely in Valhöll, *Hákonarmál* starts by telling in third-person how Óðinn sent two *valkyrjur* to fetch Hákon from the battlefield, and then effectively describes the battle that they observe. It then moves into dialogue for a conversation between Hákon and the *valkyrjur* (strophes 10–13), and a brief exchange between Óðinn, Bragi, and Hákon as the dead king arrives at his final destination (strophes 14–17). The poem then ends with a *ljóðahátt* eulogy to the king (strophes 18–21).

that neither the *ljóðaháttir* metre nor the subject matter of these poems are obviously Christian. This adds further support to the idea that these poems must have lived in the oral tradition for some time before they came to be recorded, and that they must have been performed orally for others (since the art of writing did not come to Iceland until after the Conversion). Considering the high degree of dialogue and direct speech in the poems, this will have meant that whoever composed and performed the poems (Eyvindr “skáldaspillir” Finnsson³⁶ in the case of *Hákonarmál*, and most probably another male poet in the case of *Eiríksmál*) will have had to place himself in the roles of the pagan god Óðinn as well as various female *valkyrjur* (along with other characters) as part of the performance.³⁷ Considering the hazy line between performance and reality in this period, one can imagine that such a choice, in other words, deciding to “take on” such roles in public, would not have been a good move for any Christian who was hoping to be allowed into heaven.³⁸ It might thus be said that the chosen form of the poems (especially *Eiríksmál*) adds further weight to the argument that the two poems are of pre-Christian age and pagan provenance.

As can be seen from the above, consideration of these poems from the viewpoint of performance immediately raises some very useful questions, the most important being *why* direct speech should have been chosen as a medium, and *why* the original poet should have chosen to have pagan gods (Óðinn and Bragi in both poems³⁹), female *valkyrjur* (Göndr and Skögul), and the dead kings (*Eiríkr* and *Hákon*) speak in first person in the present tense, rather than safely recounting the stories in the shape of third-person past-tense narratives.

As has been noted above, both poems centre upon the dramatic arrival of the two dead kings, *Eiríkr* Haraldsson “blóðöx” (blood-axe) and *Hákon* Haraldsson “aðalsteinsfóstri” (foster-son of Aðalsteinn) in Valhöll after their deaths in battle. As Andreas Nordberg has underlined, it is immediately worth noting that the chosen setting of *Eiríksmál* (and the climax of *Hákonarmál*) is shown to be very similar to the probable performance space in which both poems would have been presented: a military hall with warriors, benches, wine, straw, and ale cups.⁴⁰ *Eiríksmál*, strophe 1, begins by stressing this similarity to listeners:

36 See further Holm-Olsen, “Øyvind Skaldspillir,” on this poet.

37 It is noteworthy that most of those poems that have a title ending with *-mál* (*Grímnismál*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Skírnismál*, *Alvíssmál*, *Reginismál*, *Fáfnismál*, *Sigrdrífumál*, and *Atlamál*) tend to be mythological Eddic poems and take the form of direct speech, many using *ljóðaháttir* for this purpose (*Atlamál* being the exception here). It would appear that whoever chose to name *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál* saw the poems as belonging to the same genre.

38 On legends telling of how people who take on the role of the devil—or other horned figures—attract Satan’s attention, see further Tydeman, *Theatre in the Middle Ages*, 215; af Klintberg, *Types of the Swedish Legend*, 220; and Bregenhøj and Larsen, “Masks and Mummie Traditions,” 228.

39 Admittedly there is some suggestion that Bragi, the Nordic god of poetry, was originally a human court poet (Bragi Broddason) who was taken into the ranks of the gods, something which adds to the idea noted below that there was some blurring between the world of the court and the world of Valhöll.

40 Nordberg, *Krigarna i Odins sal*, 178.

Hvat er þat drauma?—kvað Óðinn⁴¹—
 er ek hugðumk fyr dag litlu
 Valhöll ryðja
 fyr vegnu fólki,
 vakða einherja,
 baðk ek upp rísa,
 bekkí at strá
 bjórker at leyðra,
 valkyrjur vín bera,
 sem vísi komi.

(What dream is it?—said Óðinn—
 sensed a little before day-break
 Valhöll was being cleared
 For slain people;
 I roused the einheriar,
 Bade them rise
 Strew benches,
 And wash beer-flagons;
 [Bade] valkyrjur bear in wine,
 As when a prince is coming.)

As in *Vafþrúðnismál* (also set in a hall), this hall setting is stressed repeatedly in both poems, *Eiríksmál*, strophes 3–4 talking of Baldr’s potential return and Eiríkr’s imminent arrival “í Óðins sali” (into Óðinn’s hall), and strophe 8 showing Óðinn inviting Eiríkr to “gakk í höll” (come into the hall). In *Hákonarmál*, strophe 14, Óðinn says that “konungr ferr [...] till hallar hinig” (a king comes [...] here to a hall). Both poems also take the potential connection between the mythological and the performance setting further when speakers use the words “hér” and “hinig” (here) when referring to the hall in question, as in *Eiríksmál*, strophe 4 “hér mun inn koma / iðfurr í Óðins sali” (in here will be coming / a prince into Óðinn’s hall; emphasis mine here and in the following) and strophe 8 “vel skalt þú hér kominn” (you are welcome here), and in *Hákonarmál*, strophe 14 (see above) and strophe 16 “þú átt inni hér / átta bræðr” (you have in here / eight brothers;), in several instances adding the preposition “inn/inni” (in), thereby stressing the idea that *this* (the setting/imaginary site of performance) is a present “in” space, which has been reached from an outside. This idea is stressed in *Eiríksmál*, strophe 4 (noted above) and 5 “inn þú biðð” (invite inside), used when Óðinn orders the heroes Sigmundur and Sinfjötli to bring in King Eiríkr, and is implied again in strophe 8 “vel skalt þú hér kominn / ok gakk í höll horskr” (you are welcome here / come wisely into the hall). The same idea occurs in *Hákonarmál*, strophe 14 “konungr ferr / sá er kappi þykkir / til hallar hinig [...]” (a king comes / who is believed to be a champion / here to a hall) and strophe 16 (see above); and in the use of the verb “koma” (come/arrive) used with Hákon in strophe 18 “er Hákon báðo / heilan koma / ráð öll ok regin” (when Hákon was / welcomed / by all the gods and decision-makers). Clearly, the world in which the poems are set is meant to be a world very much like the one that the audience sees around them, albeit one in which battles have recently taken place.⁴²

As has been stressed above, the *ljóðaháttr* metre seems to have been used almost solely for poems in direct speech (dialogues and monologues) in present tense and

⁴¹ As Fulk notes, *Eiríksmál*, 1004, the words “kvað Óðinn” (Óðinn said) are additional to the poetic metre. As with the marginal speaker markings in the manuscripts of Eddic poetry dialogues stating who speaks which strophes (also using the same form [“NN kvað”]), there would seem to be good reason to believe that these words were not part of the original poem, and for the performance of the poem to be examined without them. See further Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*, 206–12. On *Hákonarmál*, see further Fulk, *Hákonarmál*, 187.

⁴² See *Eiríksmál*, strophe 2, and *Hákonarmál*, strophes 2–10.

mainly for mythological materials (associated with the “other” world). This has important ramifications when the poems are considered from the viewpoint of performance. Among other things, it means that unlike most other skaldic poems and those Eddic poems composed in *fornyrðislag* (the other main Eddic metre), the performer is not informing an audience in the present about events that took place in the past. Instead, the narrative as a whole is presented in the form of living speech in which events are taking place “now,” in the present. In other words, as the performer speaks the words of others (mythological beings or heroes from the past) and takes on their roles (speaking in present tense), they subtly bring the mythological world and/or the past *directly into* the present. As in a play, this blend of two apparently living worlds is bound to create a kind of liminal sacred time, especially when the entire poem takes the form of speech (as is the case in *Eiríksmál* and the dialogic and monologic Eddic poems in *ljóðáháttir* such as *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Lokasenna*, and *Grímnismál*).⁴³ As in the Eddic poems in question, this would mean that the audience listening to the poem would have almost unconsciously found themselves partaking in the parallel world of the poem, and even taking on roles (something made even easier when there is not a raised stage or proscenium arch, and when the performance takes place on the same level as the audience, and even amongst them, as would have probably been the case here).⁴⁴

In *Eiríksmál* in particular, there is evidence that the same sort of transportation would have been expected to take place.⁴⁵ If in the performance, Valhöll, the hall of the dead, is said to be “here,” “inside,” “now,” then the listening audience in the hall where the performance is taking place would not only have started to feel that they were *like* the *einherjar* (the dead heroes living in Valhöll), but also would have sensed that the speaker (in the role of Óðinn) is referring to them (those Óðinn is talking to) *as* the *einherjar*. Furthermore, as both poems stress, “this” is a time in which Ragnarök (the end of the world and the final battle) is about to start. Both poems refer to signs of the imminent ending: *Eiríksmál*, strophe 3 talks of Baldr’s absence, strophe 7 mentions the ever-present danger of the wolf, Fenrir, destined to break loose at the end of the world; *Hákonarmál*, strophe 17 mentions the need for the *einherjar* to be ever-ready, and strophe 20 also refers to the danger of the wolf. Speaking in the role of Óðinn in *Eiríksmál* (logically from the “high seat” where the chieftain would normally sit, or in some other central place of prominence where he can be easily seen and heard), the performer converses with (and can apparently see in front of him) not only the *einherjar* and *valkyrjur* of Valhöll (strophe 1), but also Bragi, the god of poetry (strophes 2–4), and the mythical heroes Sigmundr and Sinfjötli (strophes 5–8). In *Hákonarmál*, Bragi is joined by Óðinn’s son, Hermóðr (strophe 14), and, as noted above, the *valkyrjur* Skölgul and Göndul (strophes 1 and 10–13). Furthermore, as the poems reach their climax, the performer also seems to see coming in through the door (somewhat like the disguised arriving Óðinn and Loki in *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Lokasenna*) visually shocking, bloody, but well-equipped

43 Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 388–408.

44 On *Grímnismál*, see Gunnell, “Eddic Performance.”

45 See Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 72–74 on “transportation” and “transformation” of audiences in drama and rituals.

dead kings, who are coming directly from the battle (*Eiríksmál*, strophe 8; see also the description of Hákon in *Hákonarmál*, strophe 15 “dreyra drifinn” [covered in blood]; and strophe 17 [on Hákon’s helmet and chain mail]). They are preceded by a loud noise which is echoed in the choice of alliterative sounds in the strophe in question, which are indicated in boldface:

Hvat **þrymr þar**—kvað Bragi⁴⁶—
sem **þúsund bifisk**
eða **mengi** til **mikit**?
Braka öll **bekkþili**,
sem muni **Baldr** koma
eptir í Óðins sali.⁴⁷

(What is that thunder,—said Bragi—,
as if thousands are tramping
or a great hoard of men?
All the bench walls creak,
as if Baldr were returning
back to Óðinn’s hall.)

(*Eiríksmál*, strophe 3)

One senses that the arrival of the kings (after the careful buildup that preceded them) in the performance might have had a similar effect on the audience to the appearance of Banquo’s ghost in *Macbeth*,⁴⁸ not least if the performer was the only one who could see them.

The stylistic features noted above, which appear to have been deliberately chosen by the poem’s original creator and then passed on within the oral tradition, certainly raise the obvious question as to whether *Eiríksmál* (and even *Hákonarmál*) was meant to be acted by several performers, or whether a solo poet-performer took on various roles (using his head, body, positioning, and voice to differentiate between them), thereby creating apparently living ghosts in the performance space that only he can see?⁴⁹ To these effects, one can add the strong likelihood that the performances would have taken place in the evening, that the room (like all medieval Nordic halls) would have been dark and smoky, that the long fire running down the centre of the hall would have thrown flickering shadows on the faces of those present, and that a certain amount of comparatively strong, impure alcohol would have been imbibed by most of those present. One can add to this the sense that those present in a Nordic warrior hall (like that suggested by the poem) would have been the equivalent of U.S. Marines on their way to (or from) Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan (with all the associations that this comparison suggests).

⁴⁶ As noted in n. 41, the speaker indication here would seem to have been added, and not be part of the original poem.

⁴⁷ It might be noted that similar thundering sound effects greet the arrival of Skírnir in the hall of Gymir in *Skírnismál*, strophe 14 and the arrivals of Óðinn and Hermóðr in Hel (when Óðinn goes to find out the meaning of Baldr’s bad dreams and Hermóðr is later sent by Óðinn to try and gain Baldr’s release from the world of death). See *Baldrs draumar*, strophe 3, and Snorri Sturlson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, 47. All references to the Eddic poems here refer to the versions of the poems in Jón Helgason, *Eddadigte* I–III. For more recent editions of the Eddic poems, see Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, *Eddukvæði*.

⁴⁸ *Macbeth*, 3.iv.

⁴⁹ See the discussion of *Þrymskviða* in Gunnell, “Eddic Performance.”

There is no question that the argument made above about how *Eiríksmál* worked (and possibly also *Hákonarmál*) is supposition, but it also involves a strong degree of probability, and, of course, as noted above, is backed up by information provided by the poems themselves. Indeed, *Eiríksmál* begins by raising the question of whether what is happening in the performance space is a dream or part of reality (see above).

What then seems to be happening in these poems when they are performed? If we start with the oral performance of *Eiríksmál*, which is more straightforward,⁵⁰ it is evident that direct speech is deliberately used to create a very liminal situation, which not only gives the pagan martial audience an image of the next world that awaits them, but also underlines that they themselves are nearly there. As noted above, for the duration of the performance, they would have found themselves being placed in another role, when they are referred to as Óðinn's *einherjar* by the performer. This situation might have been aided and abetted by the fact that many rulers of the time (with the help of their poets) went out of their way to stress their genealogical relationship to the gods (and especially Óðinn and Freyr).⁵¹ This may well have also applied to the chieftain/earl/king sitting in the high seat at the time of the performance. In a sense, Óðinn was already in the building.

Also worth noting as part of this discussion is the formal entrance of Eiríkr shown in *Eiríksmál*, which has certain interesting ritualistic aspects. Indeed, it seems to echo deliberately what appears to have been a stock scene in *Ljóðaháttir* poetry.⁵² An obvious parallel is found in the dramatic Eddic poem *Vafþrúðnismál*, in the scene depicting Óðinn's own formal arrival in Vafþrúðnir's hall prior to the initiation-like knowledge contest the god subsequently engages in with the "jötunn" (giant/etin) (direct parallels in wording are given in boldface):

Heill þú nú Eiríkr, —kvað Sigmundr
vel skalt þú hér **kominn**
ok gakk í **høll** horskr.
Hins vilk þik fregna,
hvat fylgir þér
jofra frá eggþrimu?

(Hail Eiríkr, —said Sigmundr—
You are welcome here;
Come into the hall, brave one.
But I want to ask
who follows you,
which lords, from the clash of blades?)
(*Eiríksmál*, strophe 8)

Heill þú nú Vafþrúðnir!
nú em ek í **høll** **kominn**,
á þik síáfan síá;
hitt vil ek fyrst víta,
ef þú fróðr sér
eða alsviðr, iðtunn.

(Hail, Vafþrúðnir!
Now I have come into the hall,
and can see you in person.
But the first thing I want to know
is whether you are knowledgeable,
or omniscient, jötunn.)
(*Vafþrúðnismál*, strophe 6)

50 See n. 34 above.

51 See, for example, *Ynglinga saga* in Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 1:9–83; and the various Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies.

52 See also n. 47 above on the accompanying sound effects preceding the arrival.

Further parallels can be found between the way Óðinn sends Sigmundr and Sinfjötli out of the room to greet Eiríkr in strophe 5, and the way in which the *jötunn* daughter Gerðr orders her servant to receive Freyr's representative, Skírnir, in *Skírnismál*, strophe 16:⁵³

Sigmundr ok Sinfjötli,
rísið snarleg a
ok gangið í gogn grami,
inn þú biðð,
ef Eiríkr sé,
hans er mér nú vón.

(Sigmundr and Sinfjötli,
get up quickly
and go to meet the prince,
invite him in,
if it is Eiríkr,
I've been expecting him.)

(*Eiríksmál*, strophe 5)

Inn bið þú hann ganga
í okkarn sal
ok **drekka inn mæra mið** [...];

(Invite him to come
into our hall
and drink the shining mead [...].)

(*Skírnismál*, strophe 16)

Other echoes can be heard in the welcome given by Óðinn to Hákon in *Hákónarmál*, strophe 16:

Einheria grið
þú skalt allra hafa,
þigg þú at ásom öl [...].

(The peace of the einherjar
you will be given,
receive ale from the æsir [...].)

(*Hákónarmál*, strophe 16)

This formal offering of ale or mead (often accompanied by formal, ritualistic, respectful "Hail" greetings like those quoted from *Eiríksmál* and *Vafþrúðnismál* above) are also found in *Skírnismál* and *Sigrdrífumál* (in both cases in close association with strophes dealing with runic magic) when Gerðr bows to Skírnir's threats, agreeing to sleep with Freyr, and when the *valkyrja* Sigrdrífa greets the hero Sigurðr after he has woken her from her sleep:

Heill ver þú nú heldur, sveinn,
ok **tak við hrímkálki**,
fullom forns miaðar!

(Hail to you rather, lad!
Take this frosted goblet,
Full of ancient mead!)

(*Skírnismál*, strophe 37)

⁵³ Another parallel can be found in *Lokasenna*, strophe 10, where Óðinn orders his son Viðarr to give up his seat to the visitor Loki.

Heill dagr!	(Hail to the day!
Heilir dags synir!	Hail to the sons of the day!
Heil nótt ok nípt! . . .	Hail night and her kinswoman! . . .
Heil æsir!	Hail æsir gods!
Heilar ásynior!	Hail æsir goddesses!
Heil sá in fiölnýta fold! . . .	Hail beneficent earth! . . .
Biór fær ek þér,	I bring you ale,
brynþings apaldr,	apple tree of battle,
magni blandinn	full of power
ok megintíri [...].	and glory [...].
(Sigrdrífumál, strophes 3–5)	

It might be noted that in both *Sigrdrífumál* and *Skírnismál*, the formal greeting and offering of drink are ritualistic turning points. In addition to constituting a formal welcome to the space, they also seem to represent the final step of what seems to be a kind of initiation into manhood (in both cases the figures in question have received weapons and killed an adversary prior to their being offered drink by a female figure who inhabits the outside, at the end of the night).⁵⁴ One is drawn to consider whether something similar is going on in *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*, and whether they, too, had some ritualistic purpose related to the funeral activities of the two kings. Arnold van Gennep talks of rites of passage having three stages: those involving “separation,” “transition,” and “reincorporation,” funerals essentially being acts of separation.⁵⁵ Considering the circumstances which apparently surrounded their construction,⁵⁶ one wonders whether the poems might have been a means of offering a sense of closure to followers, as the dead are symbolically shown to be reincorporated with the heroic ancestors on the “other side.” Indeed, considering the performances of these poems in which the dead kings are shown entering the hall, one notes an interesting statement from *Eyrbyggja saga* (in the context of a ghost story), that “høfðu menn þat fyrir satt, at þá væri monnum vel fagnat at Ránar, ef sædauðir menn vitjuðu erfis síns” (people believed that those who had been drowned had been well received by the sea-goddess Rán if they attended their own funeral feast).⁵⁷ In a sense, one could argue that in their use of first-person direct speech in the present, these two poems depict the kings simultaneously visiting their own funeral feasts *and* being received into Valhöll.

In short, considering the poems from a performance viewpoint, one wonders whether they were meant to form part of a kind of enacted Irish wake, marking a form of closure but simultaneously underlining for all those present that death is not just the end, but a new beginning on another level of existence (that echoed and sometimes blended with the world of the present)? One might bear in mind that all of those in the warrior comitatus associated with the royal hall would have previously under-

54 See further Gunnell, “Til holts ek gekk.”

55 Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 44.

56 See n. 32 above.

57 Einar Ólafur Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, *Eyrbyggja saga*, 148.

gone some kind of initiation involving, among other things, an oath of allegiance which implied they were ready to give up their lives for their leader.⁵⁸ There is thus reason to question whether, in a ritual sense, the poems in question were not just acts of parting, but provided also a form of initiation into the world of the dead, an initiation that was perhaps envisaged as being similar to those undergone by all of the warriors as they became new members of the *comitatus*, which would have had faint parallels to a group of Hells Angels or Marines. In short, do these poems, considered in the necessary sense of performance, sound, and movement, perhaps also provide us with some insight not only into such initiatory religious activities, but also the ways in which poetic performance played a key role in transforming the hall into a religious space in which men momentarily (and sometimes permanently) became gods or heroes, and in which the alcohol they were drinking became something more ritually potent (like wine at a Christian communion)?⁵⁹

As has been noted above, in their extant state after having been passed on in the oral tradition for several hundred years, *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál* are probably fragmentary, and possibly even (in the case of *Hákonarmál* in particular) amalgamations of more than one poem. As stated earlier, much of the above is naturally supposition, but it hopefully provides some sense of what the Performance Studies approach has to offer for the analysis of Old Norse (and Old English) poetry, and the ways in which, with the help of both archaeology and living fieldwork, this approach can be used as a pathway to gaining some sense of the experience of the Old Norse world in which the world view that surrounded daily life seems to have been permeated by a sense of the religious. In the very least, the examination given here should provide some insight into the ways in which these ancient poems might have originally worked and been intended to function, as a form of combined sound, music, vision, and movement in space, and not least as performances which had the potential of transforming space and those in it momentarily or permanently. As such, they were a very different phenomenon to the fossilized records we now encounter in the silent library.

58 See further Schjødtt, *Initiation Between Two Worlds*.

59 See further Gunnell, “*Hof, Halls*”; Gunnell, “*Narratives, Space, and Drama*”; and Gunnell, “*Drama of the Poetic Edda*.”

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