

Leeds Studies in English

New Series XLIII

2012

Edited by

Alaric Hall



Editorial assistant
Victoria Cooper

Leeds Studies in English

<www.leeds.ac.uk/lse>

School of English
University of Leeds

2012

least), we have to thank the scholarship and teamwork of the three editors, for producing not only a fine critical edition, but an illuminating account of Middle English devotional translation.

NAOË KUKITA YOSHIKAWA

SHIZUOKA UNIVERSITY

Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, *Old Norse Women's Poetry: The Voices of Female Skalds*. Library of Medieval Women. Cambridge: Brewer, 2011. 158 pp. ISBN 9781843842712. £60

This volume brings together an extensive collection of verse attributed to women poets in Old Norse-Icelandic texts from a wide range of sources and periods. We find stanzas from *Heimskringla*, *Hjalmpés saga ok Qlvis*, old and young skaldic verse, eddic poetry and almost everything between, spoken by queens and ogresses alike, demonstrating the breadth of the extant poetry attributed to women. The translations — first, poetic and figurative verse, and second, literal and straightforward prose — are generally accurate, and, moreover, they ingeniously convey to a non-specialist not only the content of the verse, but the characteristic features of *dróttkvætt* and eddic metre. For all these reasons, this volume, which entices the reader into the intriguing world of Old Norse-Icelandic women's poetry, lucidly introduced and translated by Straubhaar, will be valuable for a number of audiences.

The book is arranged into six sections with verses by women from a continuum of categories, ranging between those who probably existed and did compose the stanzas attributed to them in the sources; 'quasi-historical' women, mainly from the *Íslendingasögur*; legendary figures such as Brynhildr and Hervor; and those many elusive female characters from across the corpus who are in some way 'Other', such as human women uttering magic spells and prophecy, or those depicted as monstrous, such as giantesses and even *finngálkn* (a hybrid horse-human creature). There is a special chapter for women's dream-verse, containing doom-laden poems from the *Sturlunga* compilation, a relatively neglected source, both with regards to female characters and poetry. A brief introduction outlines the collection's scope and approach, as well as basic aspects of eddic and *dróttkvætt* style and metre, and the book also includes a glossary of names and a timeline of Old Norse-Icelandic literature. These tools are intended to assist students and novices to the field to analyse the verses, whereas they are also encouraged to seek them out in their original saga context. In fact, it is doubtful if much of the poetry makes sense without it, and the full exchanges — often with men — that give rise to the verses, but Straubhaar does her best to solve this problem by giving brief background information and narrative context before each poem. The gist of each stanza is also distilled in a line or two, followed by a double translation in verse and prose, with the aim to communicate both the complexity of the metre and the poems' content and poetic diction (their kennings and *heiti*). At times, Straubhaar unpacks ambiguous words, comments on the style or speculates further on the poet's background, e.g. in her lively discussion of Jórunn *skáldmær*; these informative and engaging passages illuminate the verses, and I found myself wishing there had been more of them, with fuller and more up-to-date references to secondary literature.

The book's two greatest strengths are its translations, and its breadth of sources. It thus succeeds first on a practical level, compiling in one volume, and translating into English, women's poetry from all over the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus — a collection which would otherwise be a huge undertaking even for a specialist to access. Second, bringing together

poems from texts that have traditionally been categorised into discrete genres of varying academic prestige seems potentially fruitful and in line with current scholarly trends. The chapter division, thematic rather than genre-based, has the effect of bringing into direct conversation poetry that otherwise would not necessarily have been obviously related, e.g. verse uttered by trollwomen in the *fornaldarsögur* and Bragi Boddason's skaldic verse, or 'magic-workers' from *Völuspá*, *Orvar-Odds saga* and *Bósa saga*. This juxtaposition has the tantalising potential to facilitate new connections and comparative insights, whether between individual verses or with non-Norse material. Thus the volume will be useful for both scholars and students of Old Norse-Icelandic literature and culture, and, because of the reliable translations, those from outside the field.

Also welcome are verses that have been marginalised by editors, such as those uttered by Unnr Marðardóttir in *Njála* about her husband Hrótr's predicament and its effect on their marriage, preserved in manuscripts belonging to the so-called X branch, but relegated to the appendix of the Íslenzk fornrit edition on the basis that they were considered later additions to the saga (*Brennu-Njáls saga*, ÍF 12, 1954, CLIV and 24). However, such close attention to manuscript preservation is regrettably not always present: for example, *fóstra* 'foster-mother', the last word of a verse spoken by a homesick Helga in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, is astonishingly, and despite manuscript evidence to the contrary, emended by all its editors to *fóstri* 'foster-father', as Helga Kress discussed at length in her article 'Fyrir dyrum fóstru' (*Tímarit Háskóla Íslands* 4 (1989): 133-44; reprinted in the eponymous collection of articles by Helga, 1996). This inaccurate rendering of the word by previous editors is silently retained by Straubhaar, thereby changing the meaning of the stanza, and arguably writing women and their existence beyond male relationships out of the saga. As the author states, it would have been beyond the scope of this volume to go through the manuscript witnesses and textual history of every stanza printed, but instances such as Helga's verse, where editors have been unnecessarily invasive, could have prompted a discussion of editorial approaches and the attitudes to gender that underpin them.

Although the division of female characters in the first two chapters might suggest otherwise, Straubhaar quite rightly mostly stays away from questions of historicity of the women poets featured, which in her words are 'unsolvable, and ultimately uninteresting' (4). All that we know is that the scribes who committed these verses to vellum, and thus probably their sponsors and audiences, saw it as entirely possible that women should compose and perform poetry in the settings described in the sources, or regarded these figures as productive literary vehicles and mouthpieces for verse with prophecies, curses, incitement speeches, laments, warnings, threats, and flattery. Somewhat disappointingly, however, especially considering the goal of the Library of Medieval Women series as not only to 'offer texts (in translation)' but also (according to the publisher's website) 'interpretive essays illuminating women's intellectual and spiritual life', Straubhaar does not take the opportunity in the introduction to discuss the themes and preoccupations of these poems in much detail. Although the distinction between the private and public spheres are not always clear-cut in Old Norse-Icelandic literary sources, few women are portrayed as breaking out of their traditional *innan stokks* 'domestic sphere' roles. Guðrún P. Helgadóttir argued in her pioneering *Skáldkonur fyrri alda* (1961, 15–16) that, as a result, women's poetry, with a few exceptions, tends to be short occasional verse (*lausavísur*) preoccupied with the personal. Thus, do the poems have something in common — distinguishable from men's poetry — because they are ostensibly by women? Or do they resist generalisations, suggesting that

Old Norse-Icelandic female characters and their roles are varied and multi-dimensional — conditioned not only by their gender but by other variables including age, social and economic status, race, physical attributes, and so forth? Are women poets distinct from other female characters in any way? These are only a few of the questions this volume prompts, and it seems that Straubhaar would have been expertly placed to pick up where Guðrún Helgadóttir left off and offer some comment on the themes found in the poetry, and perhaps the idea of women's subjectivity more widely, but readers are left to draw their own conclusions on that subject.

This volume is intended 'to give voice to [*Laxdæla saga's* Bróka-]Auðr and her sisters ... whose exploits, poetic and otherwise, were considered memorable enough to record in the Middle Ages' (p. vii). Straubhaar certainly succeeds in her admirable goal, and the book's inclusion in the Library of Medieval Women series, and its accessibility, will hopefully draw the general medievalist's attention to this remarkable poetry. Norse specialists will continue to use the more philological *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* editions and their commentaries as their primary sources, but they will also benefit from reading the verses in a different context, with poems from different genres, composed and uttered by women of all kinds of backgrounds, side by side.

JÓHANNA KATRÍN
FRÍÐRIKSDÓTTIR

THE ÁRNI MAGNÚSSON INSTITUTE
FOR ICELANDIC STUDIES
and
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Nikolai Tolstoy, *The Oldest British Prose Literature: The Compilation of the Four Branches of the 'Mabinogi'*. Lewiston, Queenston, and Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009. viii + 570pp. ISBN 978 0 7734 4710 3. £99.99 to libraries, £39.50 (inc. p.& p.) to individuals.

Count Tolstoy, kinsman of the great novelist, has long been a conspicuously brave and principled figure in English public life. With his study of these famous tales from the *Mabinogion* he again enters the arena, and with some success. The volume, given the Adèle Mellen Prize by its publishers, also won a Welsh Book of the Year award for 2010, and comes with a foreword by Nicolas Jacobs of Jesus College, Oxford. Readers will hence ask if the book's controversial arguments deserve such recognition and have permanent importance. As this is especially so for non-specialists unwilling to enter the cross-fire of Celtic Studies, we shall sum up what the book tells us, and then say if we agree.

The Oldest British Prose Literature has two qualities that compel respect. It is the most ambitious attempt ever made to provide definitive answers for the date and origins of these four classic tales of love, magic, and adventure. It is also scrupulously fair in citing critics with whom Count Tolstoy disagrees. It has eight chapters, full bibliography, and selective index.

We start with questions of composition and structure, and the significance of 'four branches'. Then we go on to the problem of date, where linguistic and historical factors are to the fore. Chapter three looks in detail at the second tale, of Branwen. It says much on historical aspects of the 'Crown of London' with which Branwen's brother Bendigeidfran is invested, and on the more nebulous subject of Bendigeidfran or Brân as pre-Christian psychopomp, who (like Egyptian or Greek equivalents) guides mortals over the waters of death. Chapter four continues analysis of the tale of Branwen and its Irish elements. Special attention is