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Onomastic Paronomasia
in Old Norse-Icelandic:
Technique, Context, and Parallels

Fredric L. Cheyette's recent book, *Ermengard of Narbonne and the World of the Troubadours*, recalls this attractive and interesting twelfth-century ruler and patroness of the arts to our attention, although students of Old Norse poetics will regret that greater space is not allowed yet another poet at her court, albeit for only a brief visit, Rögnvaldr Kali Kolsson, skald and Earl of Orkney.[1] As recounted in *Orkneyinga saga*, the earl left Orkney in 1151 with a small fleet of warships with the intention of visiting the Holy Land.[2] One of his Mediterranean ports of call was the city of Narbonne, then ruled by the vicountess Ermengard, called *Ermingerðr* in the saga. Although still in her mid-twenties, she would have been twice married at this point but was clearly the effective ruler of the city and environs, and would go on to play a major role in the politics of Languedoc and Provence. Whatever its historical accuracy,

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[1] The earl is mentioned in passing in the "Introduction" (Cheyette 2001: 2-3). See, more recently, Caille 2005.

[2] *Orkneyinga saga,* ed. Finnbogi Guðmundsson, 1965. The text relevant to present purposes is excerpted from the longer saga in *Jórsalaför Rögnvalds jarls* [*Earl Rögnvald's Journey to Jerusalem*], ed. Finnbogi Guðmundsson, 1996. The work is conventionally known as *The Saga of the Earls of Orkney* in English.

the saga recounts that Rögnvaldr was given a warm reception at the port and court of Narbonne.

The earl was an accomplished poet and thus it is not too surprising to find, according to the conventions of the genre as best exemplified in the skalds' or poets' sagas, examples of purportedly impromptu skaldic verse interspersed in the narrative.[3] This practice was continued by the earl during the long journey down the east coast of England, along the Atlantic coastline and the length of the Mediterranean. Some of the stanzas, called *lausavísur* 'loose verses' since not part of a longer poem or a group of stanzas, are most illuminating in describing seafaring, more specifically sail-trimming, maneuvers in fair- and foul-weather sailing.[4] Reaching Narbonne, Earl Rögnvaldr is shown to have composed five skaldic poems (conventionally numbered 55-59) in praise of or reference to Ermengard, mistress of the city, although the narrative does not suggest that these were ever formally presented to this patroness of poets.[5] In each of the stanzas, with the important exception of the first, the attractive young woman is named, *Ermingerðr,* although this nominative form is not itself represented and thus the woman is not overtly shown as agent in these stanzas.[6]

One of the conventions of Norse erotic verse, whether adulatory or scurrilous, was to encode the woman's name, typically in the first poem of a series, and such a possibility, not previously explored in print, will be the initial concern of this essay. Rögnvaldr's

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[3]   On verse composition and social status, see Nordal 2003. Rögnvaldr was the co-author of *Háttalykill* (ca. 1140), a collection of poems enumerating legendary heroes that also illustrates skaldic meters, and thus may be thought to have had a theoretical as well as practical interest in poetics; for a general appreciation of the earl and his cosmopolitain court, see Bibire 1988.

[4]   On the Earl's maritime vocabulary, see Sayers 1998; on other skaldic "travel" verse, see Schulze 1986.

[5]   On this poetic interface, see Tomany (forthcoming).

[6]   On personal names in skaldic verse, see Kuhn 1983: 111-13.

taste for word-play is recognized.[7] We may then judge ourselves authorized to go looking for *Ermingerðr* in stanza 55 (as we have the saga manuscripts). The stylistic device most often used in such cases was called *ofljóst*, which we might call punning substitution, a bit like Cockney rhyming slang.[8] To improvise an English example, an innocuous verse that talked about a rider keeping his *orb* on the *course*, would, because of context and key word *course*, suggest a *horse*. The nimble-minded then substitute *mare* for *horse* and *eye* for *orb* and thus determine, social context of course helping, that the poem was addressed to *mare-eye* or Mary.

Given the formal conventions of skaldic verse of the *dróttkvætt* type--where we should not see constraints so much as opportunities for virtuoso effects–conventions that include the six-syllable line, two alliterating words in line one and one at the head of line two of the couplet (all initial vowels alliterate with each other), half and full internal rhyme in alternating lines, requirements of syllable length, freely disarticulated syntax and sentence structure, kennings or metaphoric circumlocutions, etc., the couplet tends to be relatively discrete in content and to be the primary unit of organization.[9] Above this, we have the pair of couplets or a *helmingr*, a half poem. While the earl's second *helmingr* will be the object of initial close scrutiny, prudence dictates that we begin with the poem as a whole. To identify formal features in order to determine how these

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[7] See Frank 1972.

[8] Recent authoritative commentary includes Frank 1978: 69, Faulkes 1997: 221, Nordal 2001: 205f., Clunies Ross 2005: 111. For a concise definition and exemplification, see Holtsmark 1956-78 cols. 670-72. The device was not restricted to name encryption and seems to have designated less complex puns as well. The trope did not necessarily have a light-hearted or mischievous application; see Frank 1972, and more recently Zacher 2002: 372-80.

[9] General and specific studies on formal features relevant to this note include Frank 1972 and 1978, Farmini 1983-84, Gade 1995, which reviews the work of Kuhn, and O'Neil 2001.

may interact with semantic correspondences, contrasts, punning, and the like, alliteration will be indicated in **bold,** full internal rhyme (same vowel and consonant or consonant cluster) in *italics*, and half internal rhyme (different vowel, same consonant[s]) <u>underlined</u>:

> V*íst*'s at **f**rá berr **fl**estu
> **F**r*óð*a meldrs at *góð*u
> **v**el sk*ú*faðra **v***íf*a
> **v**öxtr þ*inn*, konan sv*inn*a.
> Sk<u>orð</u> lætr **h**ár á **h**<u>erð</u>ar
> **h**aukv*all*ar sér f*all*a,
> **á**t<u>görn</u>um rauð'k <u>ern</u>i
> *ilk*a, gult sem s*ilk*i.

> Truly your tresses, wise lady, clearly surpass (the hair) of most women with locks of Fróði's milling (gold milled by giantesses for King Fróði = golden hair). The hawkland's (= arm's) pillar (= woman) lets her hair–yellow as silk--fall to her shoulders; I redden the greedy eagle's claw. (adapted from Bibire 1988)

Given the metrical status of the couplet, we might expect to find the name of the addressee encoded in a single pair of verses–if at all. The first *helming*r, four verses in all, establishes women's hair as the central motif. Mythological and legendary allusions, usually part of a kenning, are common in skaldic verse and also serve to heighten the register by calling on time-honored cultural lore. The giantesses milled gold for the legendary king and thus we learn the girl's hair, as if tresses of Fróði's milling, to have been golden. There is the hint of a rising movement in the *helmingr* in the notion of superiority over other women; this will the object of counterpoint in the second *helmingr*.

There the reference to reddening the eagle's claws, i.e., leaving corpses as carrion, is the most arbitrary in the poem, since, once the hair motif is established, the poet could have as well called briefly on the raven's beak or the wolf's maw (these, together with

the eagle, being the classic Norse beasts of battle), or none of these—so that it might be thought a suitable matrix in which to plant a clue. Since the eagle's claw would be actually reddened by the blood of the fallen, we might see the earl as a kind of farmer (*bóndi*) of the field of battle strewn with corpses (*nár* 'corpse') so that the name of the city, Narbonne, might be thought encoded in this self-reference by the poet. But a 'corpse farmer' would more correctly be called **nábóndi*. Moreover, such an image would hardly be perceived as flattering to the city. *Erni,* dative of *örn* 'eagle,' with its *er-* + nasal, might appear a clue for the initial sound of *Ermingerðr*, and *'k*, a contraction of *ek* 'I' in the service of syllable count, might suggest its possessive pronoun form *minn* 'mine,' and thus *er + min*. Admitting this hint, we must recognize that the substitution of whole words rather than separate syllables is the more general practice.

There seem rather to be several stages in such name substitutions: first establishing significant pairs, then creating a phonic echo, finally inviting a semantic correspondence. The terms homonym and synonym have been used to designate the phonetic and semantic correspondences, but these are not always the perfect equivalences such terminology might suggest. Let us take the affinity between the hawk and eagle to be significant, and the initial sound of the latter in Norse to be a hint. If we consider the intermediate referent of the kenning *skorð haukvallar* 'prop/pillar of the hawk-plain' to be the raptor's resting place on the huntress's forearm, we can, with the prompt of the *e-* and the image of an arm, call up *ermr* 'sleeve' (related to *armr* 'arm,' with *-r* the nominative singular ending) as the unmarked simplex term to designate this item of dress and underlying part of the body. Then, since the girl's hair is being unloosed--a nice kinetic moment, reminiscent of the hawk's plunge, in verse that is otherwise often static--we could take the phonic hint in *herðar* (although not the initial sound this time) and behind *lætr hár herðar sér falla* "she lets her hair fall to her shoul-

ders" discern the unattested but fully legitimate verb **ógerða* 'ungird,' where *ó-* (or *ú-*) is the negative prefix cognate with English *un-* and *gerða* is a verb meaning 'to gird, enclose, fence,' perhaps not too far from the practical means of gathering hair to the head in an age before perms, hairpins, squeegies, and gel. In fact, *gerða* as a noun is attested as a term for part of a woman's headdress. Given that *gerði* was a term for a fenced field, *skorð* 'support' (also with internal *-rð-* and more commonly seen as *skorða*) might seem to point in this same direction, but few Icelandic fields, if any, are likely to have had fenceposts. Instead, the term was often used of ships propped up on shore and, stretching our imaginations as the verse calls on us to do, we might imagine the young girl as a hoped-for patroness supporting the earl in his naval and poetic efforts.

With *Erm-* and *-gerðr* now secured, we might go looking for the bridging element, although in my judgment it would not have been necessary. Turning back to the first *helmingr*, which had yielded no first clues, we might note that according to lore expected to have been known to the public the names of the two giantesses who milled gold for King Fróði were *Fenja* and *Menja*, from which we might lift out the *men-,* if so minded. The king's name means the 'wise one,' and is then linked to the epithet *svinn* 'wise', used of the woman–and hair covers the seat of wisdom. This exercise in reading kennings, code-breaking and heuristics can be schematized as follows:

> Major topic: letting down hair
> > Minor topic: battle
> > > First semantic pairing: hawk-ground/eagle (birds)
> > > > Phonic clue: *ern-* 'eagle'
> > > > > Substitution: *erm-* 'sleeve' for *haukvöllr* 'hawk-ground' = 'sleeve, forearm'
> > > Second semantic pairing: hair/shoulders (body parts)
> > > > Phonic clue: *herðar* 'shoulders'
> > > > > Substitution: *ógerða* 'ungird' for *láta falla* 'let fall'
> > Combination: *erm-* + *(ó)gerða* > *Ermingerðr*

Thus, by following sound clues and calling up homologies or syno-
nyms, we have, in the hawk's plain and the action of letting fall,
corporal references to both the raised arm and loosened golden
hair of the attractive girl but also, through metonymy and the lexi-
cal homologues *erm(r)* and *(ó)gerða* supplied by the poem's public,
we have a reference to the entire person and *persona*, body and
name, of the young woman at the focus of Rögnvaldr's attentions.
The earl's fancies are far from platonic, as the wish for a night in
bed with the girl (st. 57) makes clear.[10] Possession of a name gave
power over the being so named, and encrypted names gave exclu-
sive power–but here not so exclusive that it could not be shared
with a qualified public.[11] Solving the puzzle, or trying to, makes us
complicit in the earl's attempted seduction and expending our en-
ergy on the poem gives us a stake in the outcome of its interde-
pendent effects. The fans of skaldic verse are always on the side of
the poet.

Self-referentiality

Are there other identities concealed in the verses? And if so, who
better than the poet himself? The name *Rögnvaldr* has as first con-
stituent *rögn* meaning 'powers'; its variant *regin* was often used as a
circumlocution for 'the gods.' The second element *valdr* means
'ruler' and the name as a whole might be rendered 'power-wielder.'
King Fróði certainly qualifies as a ruler and, from the same line, the
word *góði* 'profit' from *góðr* 'good' could prompt a word with only
slightly different vocalism, *goði,* meaning 'chieftain' with the concur-
rent duties of heathen priest. Thus we have two clues for the sec-
ond element of the earl's name. Still within the same couplet, the

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[10] On just how personal a wish this might be, see Matiushina 1998.

[11] On cooperative interpretation, see Poole 1988, on reception generally Gade,
1995, and on the esthetic appreciation of skaldic verse Kreutzer 1989, and
other studies cited here.

noun *meldr* 'milling' calls up an association with 'that milled,' gold by the giantesses but more commonly flour, *mjöl,* for baking bread. Such meal would seldom have been wheat under the agricultural conditions of early northern Europe and barley, oats and rye would have been more common. Of these three, we choose *rúgr* 'rye' (possibly *rugr,* again recalling that the *-r* is the nominative singular ending and, unlike the case for *meldr,* not part of the root). Yet *Rúg-valdr or *rúgar-valdr may not be too convincing to some readers as play on the name *Rögnvaldr.*

But if this line of argument is provisionally allowed, a certain parity is re-established in the poem between what might be seen as the male subject and female object. Since the latter has a basic affinity with the giantesses and their supernatural abilities, after the substitutions it is the poet who is milled by the swirling, falling tresses of the young beauty–rotary motion replaced by perpendicular--and their product is poetry. Referring to her hair as *vöxtr* 'growth' is consonant with the possible hidden image of cereal crops, and recalls the myth of the dismemberment of the primal man, Ymir, whose hair became the grass on the mountain-sides made of his bones. Here, scaled down to human life, we have a golden-haired woman ruling a city.

It is just possible that the verses may also contain a reference to the trope that they embody. As noted, this substitutive paronomasia was called *ofljóst,* and was not only applied to names. This can only be understood as the prefix *of* meaning 'excessive' and the adjective *ljóss* 'clear, evident.' Why would such riddling punning be called 'too clear'? Some contemporary comment and more recent speculation follow but first we might look to what otherwise appears a kind of filler, *berr,* in the very first line of the poem. The woman's hair is *clearly* superior to that of other blondes. Thus *berr* 'clear' can be seen as an overt hint that the device *ofljóst* 'too clear' may be expected.

In this lexical sleuthing we have seen that the formal features of

alliteration and internal rhyme, which establish non-semantic links, do not contribute much toward identifying the ultimate onomastic referents. At most, one of the rhyming elements, such as the consonant cluster *-rð-* of *herðar*, may also be found in the sought-for word, *gerða*. Or the inflected nominal form *valla-* and verb *falla* each refer to one of the elements in the solution (arm, falling). Elsewhere, the consonant cluster of *meldr* points not to *rúgr* and thus *rögn* but rather it "pre-echoes" the second element of the name, *valdr*. The explanations offered here are fully plausible within the conventions of skaldic poetry–which is far from tantamount to saying that they are correct.[12] This plausibility can be tested by considering a better known example from another poet, in the context of which the issue of self-referentiality (author, trope) may be further examined.

In *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, widely attributed to Snorri Sturluson, Egill as a youngster seems to have had a strong emotional bond with Ásgerðr Bjarnardóttir, who was being fostered in his family home. This is most evident in his refusal to attend the wedding of the girl to his elder brother Þórolfr. Years later, after Þórólfr has fallen at the battle of Vin Moor in 937 (likely the *Brunnanburh* mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*) in the service of the English king Athelstan, Egill exacts compensation from the king in a strikingly non-poetic way and returns to Iceland to begin a subtle courtship of his brother's widow. In the Iceland of the tenth century, a marriage between the two would serve several ends: fulfilment of Egill's long-term feelings, protection for the woman, consolidation of family economic and political interests, a further tie to a long-term friend, Arinbjörn, who was Ásgerðr's cousin. It also gives the storyline a strong thrust forward, since one of Egill's pri-

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[12]　See Frank 1972, for the comparable exploration of another of the poet's stanzas, and Clunies Ross 1989, on skaldic hermeneutics from a modern perspective.

mary concerns after the marriage will be to lay claim to Ásgerðr's inheritance in Norway. Egill begins by giving Arinbjörn a hint suitably encoded in a poem.

> Ókynni vensk, ennis
> ungr þorðak vel forðum,
> haukaklifs, at hefja,
> Hlín, þvergnípur mínar;
> verðk í feld, þás foldar
> faldr kømr í hug skaldi
> berg-Óneris, brúna
> brátt miðstalli hváta.[13]

> The young Hlín (name of a goddess) of the hawk cliff (= forearm) (= woman) is growing accustomed to uncouthness; before I had the courage to raise the cross-peaks of my forehead (= eyebrows); now I shall soon have to hide the mid-pillar of my brows (= nose) in my cape, when the hood of the land of mountain-Ónerir (a giant's name) comes to the poet's mind.

The site on the land of a mountain-like giant or on a giant mountain that might have a hood (*faldr*) would be a rocky outcrop or ridge, one term for which in Old Norse was *áss* (whose other meanings are 'beam, support'). The word *faldr* 'hood' can be equated with that hinted at in Rögnvaldr's stanza, *gerða*. Thus, the hood on the land of mountain Ónerir can be reconstituted as *Ásgerðr*. Although this encryption has long been recognized, it should be noted that in the poem we have four interleaved lexical sets, not all components of which are explicit: one group of words referring to topographical features (cliff, ridge, peak, mountain, land), another to structural elements (beam, pillar, fencing), a third to clothing (parts of a headdress, cape), the last to parts of the body (forearm, brow, eyebrows, nose), with some words, such as *áss*, belonging to more than one but with differing meanings. In addition, we

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[13] *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, 1933, Ch. 56, st. 23.

have two kinds of substitution, the kenning, where A's B stands for C, and the synonym.

What has thus far, to the best of my knowledge, not been recognized is that Egill may have put his own name in the stanza. The two most personal physical details in the verses refer to Egill's eyebrows, once figuratively referenced as the cross-peaks of his forehead, once named openly, where it is the nose that is figured. Earlier in the saga Snorri had provided a prose portrait of a surly Egill at Athelstan's court after the death in battle of his brother and before compensation had been paid by the king (Ch. 55). His bowed (*gneyptr*) head is the key element of the description and the prominent forehead, eyebrows, and nose are the first elements mentioned: *mikilleitr, ennibreiðr, brúnamikill, nefit ekki langt, en ákafliga digrt* ("Egil had very distinctive features, with a wide forehead, bushy brows and a nose that was not long but extremely broad").[14] I suggest that Snorri composed this portrait with the present stanza in mind. It is then to these parts of the body that we might look for clues to the name. In the poem Egill likens his craggy face to a mountain top. *Gnípa* meant 'peak, jutting pinnacle' and an acceptable homonym is *egg* 'edge.' Then, looking to the next mention of the brows and nose, we could lift the *-all-* from *miðstalli brúna* 'midpillar of brows' and conjoin it (with a different vowel, as would be the case in internal half rhyme) with *egg* to give *egg-ill*. But another feature of mountainous terrain is ravines or gullies, *gil* in Old Norse-Icelandic, for a neater *egg-gil*. And, on a larger scale, if we convert the up-and-down arc or apex of an eyebrow to a different kinetic image, we could say that *Egils saga* up to the death of, and compensation for, Þórólfr has been centrifugal, as he leaves home, leaves Iceland, makes his way and fortune as poet and fighter abroad. After the English adventure and marriage to Ásgerðr the action is centripetal, as Egill secures his position in Iceland, al-

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[14]   *Egils Saga*, trans. Bernard Scudder (2000: 90).

though the inheritance claim does require his presence in Norway.[15]

Egill recites another stanza for Arinbjörn in which he explicitly warns him that word-play was at work in the first poem about his courting intentions. But then, rather than have Arinbjörn work out the riddle, Egill tells him openly of his interest in Ásgerðr. He had previously incorporated his friend's name, too, in another poem.[16] When Arinbjörn's sister, Gyða, asks Egill how his affairs have gone in England, and the poet responds with the stanza that names his friend and thanks him for his help, the sagaman states that Egill replied in the clearest way possible–*ljósasta*–which we are now authorized to identify as a hint: "Attention! Punning Ahead!" In the poem about Ásgerðr reviewed above, the poet hides his face in his cloak, perhaps a hint that more is hidden in the verse than meets the ear. In the narrative context of the sagas (as distinct from the more closed world of the verses), it then seems to have been a convention to alert the public to paronomasia, either through a word referencing the notion of clarity or, in Egill's case concerning Ásgerðr, by overt admission. Snorri then gives us two examples of how this signaling might be narrativized, once in the authorial voice (*ljósasta*), twice in Egill's own (face-hiding image, open admission).

The stanza which Egill composes for Gyða has earlier been commented on for its encryption of the name of his friend, but the rather greater than expected wealth of reference of Rögnvaldr's verses authorizes a fresh look. Egill declaims:

> Urðumk leið en ljóta
> landbeiðaðar reiði;
> sígrat gaukr, ef glamma
> gamm veit of sik þramma;

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[15]   Egill returns to his eye-brows in his penultimate poem composed in old age, *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, Ch. 85, stanza 59, and earlier in his praise poem for Arinbjörn, *Arinbjarnarkviða*, Ch. 78, stanza 8.

[16]   Ch. 64, stanza 36, most recently discussed in Clunies Ross 2005: 27.

þar nautk enn sem optar
arnstalls sjötulbjarnar;
hnígrat allr, sás holla
hjalpendr of för gjalpar.[17]

The ugly land-begger's anger became intolerable to me; the cuckoo
will not alight if it knows that the vulture of battle-din (= eagle)
prowls about it; there, once again, I profited by the bear of the
hearth-seat (= Arinbjörn); no need to give in when one boasts
such a loyal supporter on his course.

The Old Norse name *Arinbjörn* is composed of two elements, *arinn*
'hearth' (originally for sacrificial offerings) + *björn* 'bear' and thus is
a typical warrior kenning. Egill separates the two elements and cre-
ates the phrase *ARNstalls sjötulBJÖRN* ('hearth-altar's settee-bear').
This rather domesticates the figure of his friend–one is tempted to
think of Teddy Bear culture–and contrasts the serviceable bear and
the mischievous but allusive cuckoo (the poet himself) with one of
the conventional beasts of battle, the eagle, here referenced in the
kenning din-vulture, the bird feasting off the sounds and slain of
battle.

The nominal compound *landbeiðuðr* 'land-seeker' has been rec-
ognized as a kenning for 'king,' since territorial expansion and con-
solidation is a chief royal concern. Eiríkr *blóðøx* ('Blood-Axe') Har-
aldsson is surely meant, but the phrase has, to my mind, added
point since Eiríkr held no land in Norway at the time and the king-
dom of York was a substitute power base. Although it is unlikely
that Egill knew the etymology of the name *Eiríkr* to be **Einn-ríkr*
'sole-ruler' < Gmc **aina-ríkia-,* he might have entertained the pun *ei*
(= *eigi*) + *ríkr* 'non-ruler,' for one still seeking land. My translation
'land-begger' is intended as a nod in this direction. But we do not
find the king's name encrypted in quite the same punning way as in
the case of Arinbjörn. What of his queen, Gunnhildr? The two ele-

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[17]   Ch. 64, stanza 36.

ments of this name, *gunnr* and *hildr*, both mean 'war, battle.' Thus, while the *gamm glamma* 'din-vulture' could refer conventionally to the king, the alliterating pair recall the semantic tautology of the queen's name (alliteration also coerces *gaukr* 'cuckoo' into this sphere of reference, as the Queen's enemy). In addition, *hilduri* was a poetic term for a dark-plumaged bird. This association may then reflect, or even have been Snorri's source for, the earlier incident in York when the queen, in a guise of a swallow (*svala*), sought to distract Egill from the composition of his head-ransom poem, *Höfuðlausn*. Arinbjörn kept watch at the window. Egill's apparently modest self-identification with the cuckoo can be explained if we recall the bird's practice of laying eggs in other birds' nests, the egg in this case being the poem, which then takes on its future life from the context of this foreign nest, while the bird gets away. And the pun on *egg* 'egg' and *Egill* was always available. Even the bird's call 'coo-coo' is in counterpoint to the dualism of *gamm glamma* or *Hildigunnr*. And the otherwise unattested verb *gjalpa*, interpreted on the basis of an Old English cognate as 'to boast of,' is perhaps a late, second-helming echo of the alliterating *gaukr*, the cuckoo boasting of its song, its escape, its egg left behind, and its friend in flight.

Egill turns from birds and battle to bear and benefit. The poet freely admits that he has profited from his friend's intervention. Here and even in the more formal eulogy of his friend (*Arinbjarnarkvíða*) it is not his martial qualities that are stressed but his generosity and humanity.[18] Rather strikingly, Egill here uses the verb *njóta*, which meant 'to have use or benefit of,' not otherwise unknown in situations where advantage was drawn from kinship or friendship, but also the verb used of conjugal partners who have the sexual benefit of each other (the curse put on Kormákr and Steingerðr by the sorceresss and on Hrútr by Gunnhildr in *Njáls saga* being the best known instances of this signification). The

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[18]   The hearth bear image recurs in stanza 16 of *Arinbjarnarkvíða*, Ch. 78.

slightly older Arinbjörn had favored Egill in his youth and these verses of love and gratitude open a perhaps insufficiently explored perspective on male friendship in the early north.[19] This treatment of Arinbjörn is perhaps also appropriate in a poem nominally composed in the presence of his sister. In summary, we have the possibility of as many as four names encoded or hinted at in the stanza: Arinbjörn's is the "clearest," the others appropriately darker: Eiríkr, Gunnhildr, Egill.

Visual Puns

Visual puns (rebuses) encoding personal names are well known from the Middle Ages, portraiture and heraldry providing excellent media. A combination of staged puns mediated by a kind of ek-phrasis (literary comment on an *objet d'art*) may be recoverable from an anecdote early in the career of Egill, as recounted in Ch. 31 of *Egils saga*. The three-year-old Egill has followed his father and kinsmen to a feast, from which he had earlier been debarred because of his fractiousness when in drink (!). He reaches the hall of his maternal grandfather Yngvarr and is well received at the high table, where he participates in the impromptu versifying of his seniors by addressing a praise poem to the host, highlighting his generosity and claiming that Yngvarr will never find a better three-year-old poem-smith. Egill's verse draws on dragon imagery, since dragons guarded hoards, hoards consisted of gold, and gold was a suitable recompense for a poet. Yngvarr commits the verse instantly to memory, repeats it, then waits until the next day to reward the young poet with a gift.

The poet's reward is drawn from a rather different realm than that of dragons, hoards, or even simple gold. Egill receives three

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[19]   The youthful friendship is detailed in Ch 41. Later in life Egill often supports the cause of men younger and less martially qualified than himself, e.g, Frið-geirr Gyðuson, Ch. 64.

sea-snail-shells (*kúfunga þrjá*) and a duck's egg (*andaregg*). A multitude of correspondences and associations are implicated here. The curiosities from the natural world might be thought to interest a child as playthings but have no real value; as with a poem--mere sound--value must assigned. The two kinds of fragile object have ambiguous aquatic associations: the sea-snail is not quite a fish, the duck functions in all three spheres of sky, sea, and earth. The egg is an elliptical sphere; the shells display spirals. To move to a different level, both are containers for something of value, often edible, and this and the maritime association in this context necessarily recall the myth of the mead of poetry, its initial fermentation in a cauldron, its sequestration among dwarves on a skerry, its hoarding in a cave, its transport by Óðinn in eagle-form. *Önd* (genitive *andar*) is the word for 'duck' but a homophone *önd* 'spirit, breath,' which figured in compounds such as *andagift* 'inspiration,' recalls us in a different way to the myth of the sources of poetic inspiration. And another *and-*, serving as a prefix meaning 'against,' figured in the compound *andfang* 'reception, hospitality' (and not 'duck-catching'!), further tying the complex of references to the immediate circumstances of the hall and poem. Thus, what seems a somewhat simple, even patronizing gift to a precocious poet is fraught with multiple allusions.

Egill does not name himself in his stanza but simply equates *ek* 'I' with *smiðr óðar* 'poem smith.' In the absence of the onomastic punning that we might expect in such verse, the host Yngvarr engages in a bit of oneupmanship by concrete puns that work as follows. The *andaregg*, whether a prosaic duck's egg or an egg of inspiration, is obvious enough and gives us the first component of the name *Egill*. We could even entertain the compound **egg-gildi* 'egg-recompense.' The snail-shells allude to the second half of the name since their interiors resemble the constricted way called a *geil*, a narrow, twisting glen as a topographical feature or a lane enclosed by buildings in a settlement. That Egill should receive three spiral ob-

jects may be a reference to his completion of three annual cycles. If this reading of the circumstances of Egill's first poem should seem to strain the evidence, it should be recalled that, after his last poem and his death and burial, his body is exhumed and his skull–the voice-box of the poet--is seen to be corrugated on the outside like a scallop-shell (*haussinn var allr báróttr útan svá sem hörpuskel*).[20] Here it is the author who is manipulating the imagery for a nice closure effect, and not the wily Yngvarr. And we recall the poem with the cuckoo, best known for its song and its egg, that figures at the thematic mid-point of the saga.

The poem and its reward should be homologous. A verse praising battle prowess should be rewarded with a weapon, the tool of battle, or gold, its product. But a verse praising generosity and calling attention to poetic composition is here rewarded with objects that allude to poetry, situate the poet socially, and even encode his name. The skaldic poem is a challenge to understanding and Yngvarr at once shows that he is well on his way when he is able to repeat it. By the next day he will have thoroughly explored its intricacies–none too challenging in this early poem. His reward is a challenge in return.

Egill perfectly well understands the multiple significance of his gifts. But a puzzle once solved is not redeployed. What was implicit in the gifts–the encoded name--is made explicit in Egill's follow-up verse, in which he names himself twice. Instead of further allusions to the origins of poetic inspiration we have conventional allusions to the patron as potential donor of weapons and sea-farer. The aquatic reference is retained but the four gifts are now seen as natural objects, yet still subject to metaphorical elaboration. The shells are called the ever-silent dogs of the smashing surf, the egg is the favored bed of the stream-partridge. Here *kúfungr* 'snail shell' seems

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[20] *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, Ch. 86. "It was all ridged on the outside, like a scallop shell"; *Egil's Saga*, trans. Scudder, p. 183.

to have prompted Egill to think of *kofarn* 'pet' or 'lap dog.' Unlike real dogs, these are "ever silent," since, when listened to, repeat only the sound of the sea–unlike the vocal poet. But even the conventional images are chosen with care. The sword hardened and given by the patron is called a 'wound-gosling,' consonant with the reference to the duck. And where Egill had been the poem-smith in the first stanza, Yngvarr is the sword-smith in the second. Finally, the two *helmingar* state that the one gift was made in recompense for eulogy, the other in order to please the youngster.

Poetic Loans or Common Cultural Goods?

If we now return to Rögnvaldr and compare his stanza to Egill's hinting at interest in Ásgerðr, we could posit the loan of *gerða* from Egill but also that of the image of the woman's headdress coupled with the kenning of the hawk's resting place as the forearm or sleeve. Even Rögnvaldr's *skorð* 'support' might be thought to echo Egill's *stallr* and one of the meanings of *áss*. If this complex of associations is a fully conscious one, the earl has made himself Egill's poetic heir and has equated Ermengard with one of the notable women of Icelandic history. But it seems more likely that poets drew on common cultural goods, where certain problems of meter and allusion had already been worked out at least once–a little like a sequence of computer code to perform a sub-routine that could be imported into another program–not quite formulaic diction but something similar in its freest, most creative dimension. The potential of *gerða* would then be what Gade (1995: 217) authoritatively calls "part and parcel of Norse poetic tradition ... available to the performing skalds on the subconscious level as a fundamental part of the poetic inventory." Comparable demands were made on, and comparable resources available to, the publics of skaldic verse. Here, the strict formal features of the verse would seem to have aided memorization, after which the poem could be explored for allusions of varying kinds and appreciated for the virtuoso handling

of formal features, etc. at the individual listener's leisure. This conclusion can be buttressed by the examination of comparable material in a third poet. Onomastic punning combined with kennings also occurs in the work of Kormákr. In his first stanza about Steingerðr we find the kenning *fald-Gerðr*.[21] We have seen *faldr* 'headdress, hood' in Egill's verse and recognize it as a homonym for *gerða*. In addition, *Gerðr* was a by-name of the goddess Freyja, the goddess of love and fertility. All word play on the *gerð-* root then has this potential allusion and, since *-gerðr* was a frequent element in names, its poetic utility must have been widely known to both poets and publics. Here the second half of the girl's name is represented in two different ways. The not-quite-anonymous young woman of the verses is also called *menreiði* 'bearer of necklaces.' To continue, the goddess Freyja had a famous, likely amber, necklace, but typically such ornaments were made of stones, *steinn* in Icelandic. Thus, *Stein-gerðr*. In another of Kormákr's stanzas we find *sörvi Gefnar* 'the necklace of Gefn'; *Gefn* was another by-name of Freyja, and thus calls up *Gerðr*.[22]

To return to Kormákr's initial stanza, it is introduced by a scene that has caused editorial difficulties but seems to represent the young girl being urged by her maid to have a look at the guests in the public room. To do this she steps up onto a raised threshold at the entrance to the room and either peeks over the top of the door or its lower half, or through the chink between the door and its jamb. Unbeknownst to her, the door does not reach all the way down to the threshold, so that Kormákr spots her pretty feet at the bottom, and makes them the motif of his verse. But does this scene represent a narrativization of a signal for the trope *ofljóst*, in that Steingerðr inadvertently lets more of herself become evident than she had planned?

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[21] *Kormáks saga,* 1939, Ch. 3, stanza 1.
[22] Ch. 19, st. 56; see further Frank 1970.

Name Puns: Social Context, Legal Status, Critical Evaluation

It is noteworthy that the device of the hidden name is most fre-quent in two meta-literary situations that are linked in Icelandic law. Both erotic poems addressed to unmarried women *(mansöngvar)* and defamatory satiric verse (*níðvísur*) directed at men, with accusations of unmanliness, were legally actionable.[23] We have seen courting verse in *Kormáks saga*. Striking examples of skaldic defamation are found in *Bjarnar saga hítdœlakappa* (*The Saga of Björn the Hítardal Champion*).[24] Björn plays on both a woman's given name *Oddný*, which suggests *odd-* 'point of weapon, sword' and *ný*, a poetic word for 'moon,' and on the two elements of her epithet *eykyndill* 'island-candle,' perhaps awarded because of her beauty. Most of the ensu-ing allusions can be read as having a sexual, even obscene, under-tone, with phallic imagery articulated by reference to points and candles. The exchange of scurrilous, defamatory verses is an ad-vanced stage of interpersonal male conflict, one just prior to blood-letting, but has cultural analogues in pre-battle taunts. The literary heir is the *flyting*, as between the Scottish poets Dunbar and Ken-nedy in the first decade of the sixteenth century.

It may be the antisocial purposes to which onomastic parono-masia was put that account for the particular cast given its treat-ment in treatises on poetics, literature following law. Aside from possible hints of the name in the poetry itself, theoretical commen-tary on the trope *ofljóst* is limited to just two writers, Snorri Sturlu-son and his nephew Óláfr Þórðarson *hvíta-skáld* 'the white poet.'[25]

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[23]   See the law code *Grágás* 1852-83, Vol. 1b, par. 184, 2: 392-93, Sørensen 1980, and Sayers 1999; contrast the role of encomiastic verse, Whaley 2003.

[24]   See Gade 1989.

[25]   On the ways in which the discourse of poetics was being constituted in thirteenth-century Iceland, and the pedagogic impulse of Latin textbooks assumed in the vernacular tradition, see Quinn 1994. See most recently Clunies Ross 2005: 195-97.

In his treatise on poetic diction, *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri lists a number of distinct meanings for the word *hlið*; these are the homonyms of English critical terminology. Then: "These distinctions can be made use of in poetry so as to create word-play which is difficult to understand, if it is a different distinction of meaning that has to be taken than the previous line seemed to indicate."[26] Some scholars have sensed a coolness on Snorri's part toward the device and, indeed, it is not represented in the skaldic samples he discusses elsewhere in the work. But in another work, *Háttatal*, a treatise on metrics, he mentions word-play in passing, more in terms of audience reception than poet's composition. "Hér eru sýnd í þessi vísu sextán orðtök sundrgreinilig, ok eru flest ofljós til rétts máls at fœra, ok skal þá upp taka" ("Here are demonstrated in this stanza sixteen phrases of contrary meanings, and most of them have to be turned to their proper meaning by means of word-play, and this is how it is to be understood").[27] But these examples of punning do not have names as their object and, while Snorri explains the mechanics of such substitution, he is silent on the purposes to which it was put.

Snorri's nephew Óláfr, who brings the concerns of Donatus and Priscian to the Icelandic poetic environment, gives an example of two encrypted names in verse where the poet expresses his desire for another's wife. He suggests the words *hestr* 'horse' and *hermast* 'become angry' are to be replaced by their near-synonyms *jór* 'horse' and *reiði* 'anger,' and then combined to give the woman's name *Jóreiðr*. Another phrase is to be recast as *konu má ná* 'can get a woman,' then construed as *Mána*, the genitive case of the woman's

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[26]   Snorri Sturluson, *Skaldskaparmál*, trans. Faulkes, 1987, 155; "Þessar greinir má setja svá í skáldskap at gera ofljóst at vant er at skilja ef aðra skal hafa greinina en áðr þykki til horfa in fyrri vísuorð," Snorri *Skaldskaparmál*, ed. Faulkes 1998 Vol. 1, p.109, ll. 19-21.

[27]   Snorri, *Háttatal*, ed. Faulkes, 1999, p. 17, ll. 25-27, trans. Faulkes,1987, p. 179; other brief references to *ofljóst* at 18/13 and 20/9, trans. 179, 181.

husband's name *Máni.*[28] Significantly, the example figures in Óláfr's section on poetic barbarisms, where he also calls *ofljóst* by a Latinate term, *detractio* 'substitution.'[29] He may have shared his uncle's supposed aversion to the figure. He does, however, make the clear distinction between meaning and sound, as we have seen in Rögnvaldr, both of which are subject to manipulation and substitution.

Skaldic poetry is *sui generis,* even though some of its features, such as relatively simple kennings, are found in the verse of other Germanic peoples. This has led to the intensive debate of two historical questions: the origin of the *dróttkvætt* meter and its attendant style, and the transferability of this elaborate verse form. Although early Irish verse shares a similar interest in syllable count, rhyme, alliteration, and other metrical complexity, the recent studies of Gade (1995) and Tranter (1997) conclusively prove that Irish secular verse could not have had a decisive influence on the development of *dróttkvætt,* which is best seen as the further elaboration of native Scandinavian verse forms such as the *fornyrðislag* found in Eddic verse. At most, such Irish verse might have been appreciated by a small number of bilingual members of the social elites at courts in the Irish port towns, and in the Highlands and Islands. Skaldic verse would also have been appreciated at other Norse centers in the British Isles, as exemplified in the poem *Höfuðlausn* that Egill composed in York, when he had fallen into the hands of his enemy Eiríkr *blóðøx.* Another aspect of this question is neatly summarized in Frank's study (1987): 'Did Anglo-Saxon Audiences Have a Skaldic Tooth?'[30] Yet skaldic poetics finds little reflection in Old English poetry and no influence has been detected in post-Conquest literature in Middle English. Thus both Irish influence

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[28]   Summary account of this example in Gísli Sigurðsson 2004: 99, n. 7; more extensive analysis in Snædal 1993: 216-17.

[29]   Óláfr Þórðarson Hvítaskáld, Dritte grammatische Abhandlung, 113.

[30]   See further Townend 2003.

and English affect have been largely discredited or restricted to very specific times and places.

Word Division in Early Medieval Ireland

Traditional Irish learning had a strong interest in etymological speculation based on a technique of deconstruction called *etarscarad* 'cutting between' or 'separation,' derived from the procedure followed in Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*.[31] The process is exemplified throughout *Cormac's Glossary* and the grammatical treatise *Auraicept na n-Éces*. As a few examples will illustrate, it functions very similarly to the en- and de-cryption of Norse names in skaldic verse, with a sequence in which both phonic and semantic features are brought into play. *Consain .i. cainsuin .i. suin taitnemcha* – "Consonants i.e., beautiful sounds, i.e., bright sounds."[32] The *Glossary* offers examples of the same procedure applied to names; again the etymologies are entirely fanciful but, significantly, invest the name with an added metaphorical dimension. "*Domnall*, i.e., *doman-nuall*, i.e., the celebrity (*nuall*) of the world (*domain*) about him. Or *Domn-all*, i.e., *doman-uaill*, i.e., pride of the world about him."[33] The name of a celebrated jurist is explained as having two converging sources: "*Morann*, i.e., *mór-fhinn*, i.e., great-fairhaired." This is the name given by his mother, while his father called him *Mac Máin* 'son of wealth.'[34] Just as in Norse, the base word is broken down into two elements that exhibit some similarity of sound, as if it had originally been so composed. Then the two elements are further explained or glossed by means of synonyms. The practice of glossing, transla-

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[31] See Baumgarten 2004, and his earlier studies cited there.

[32] *Auraicept na n-Éces,* ed. Calder, 1995, pp. 28-29.

[33] *Sanas Chormaic: Cormac's Glossary*, trans. J. O'Donovan, ed. Whitley Stokes 1868: 51; Irish original in *Sanas Cormaic: An Old-Irish Glossary,* ed. Kuno Meyer, 1913: 33, No. 403.

[34] *Sanas Chormaic*, 1868, p.108; original, 1913, p. 73, No. 863.

tion into the Irish vernacular, the deployment of stylistic and other registers, even the innovative Irish practice of marking word boundaries in Latin manuscripts with a space–all created a mental environment where verbal substitution, including punning, would flourish.[35]

As well as being a regular practice in lexical commentary, etymological parsing also informed some of the "selected languages," languages of poets, that is, sets of stylistic conventions and lexical registers on which poets might draw. One of these was in fact called "parted language" (*bérla etarsgartha*). Another was *bérla fortchide* or "obscure language," in which ideas were lexically encoded, perhaps by something like a reverse process. A third was "cryptic language" (*iarm bérla*).[36] Early Irish verse had a robust tradition of satire and personal invective, where punning on names was a regular feature and these "selected languages" seem to have been preferentially used.[37] Such satire was almost indistinguishable from curses.[38] The legal ramifications of early Irish satire are relatively well understood and explicit identification of the target personality, as distinct from allusion, could affect the legal consequences.[39] Early Irish metrical tracts incorporate very full discussions of grammar, meter, rhyme, genres and types of poems. In this technical literature terms for satire reference notions of biting, piercing, reddening, blistering, mockery, ridicule. Under the subheading "incantatory satire" ten subtypes are listed, of which *mac bronn* 'son of the womb' i.e., covert satire, seems most relevant to present concerns.[40] Satirical comment was most effective when the poet had knowledge of the full

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[35]   On word division in the manuscript tradition, see Ó Cróinín 2003: 7-8.

[36]   Russell 2005: 448-49.

[37]   *Auraicept na n-_ces,* 1917, pp. 102-03; Ó Cathasaigh 1977-78: 138.

[38]   Ó Cathasaigh 1986, Lisa M. Bitel 2000.

[39]   Kelly 1988: 137-39; cf. p. 44 on satirists.

[40]   Greene 1948, Meroney 1950: 204.

name (*ainm 7 uss 7 slondud* is a typical tag for the information needed and might be rendered as "name, patronym, reputation"). If, to the control that possession of a name gave, we add the euphoric joy derived from the manipulation of language, we can easily understand how it could be seen as a medium for the practice of magic.

Here is an example of a fairly transparent kind from an entry in *Cormac's Glossary* for *rer* 'blackbird' that incorporates elements mentioned above.[41] First, the cited word is glossed with its more common synonym *lon* and even the generic *én* 'bird.' Then follows a tag from popular lore that is not self-explanatory: *ut unde dicitur rerg nó redg frisin boin mir* ("hence it is said *rerg* or *redg* to the mad cow"). Finally the base word is illustrated in a poem with encoded names. The entry in the glossary interleaves the solution to the name riddles but the original verse must have looked something like this:

> Uindsi chucat ingillgugán
> mac rergagáin;
> bidh cach maith agad ar a chinnchugán
> a chendgucáin.

> Here comes to you the little stripling,
> son of the little blackbird;
> have every good thing ready for him,
> little head.[42]

This has been interpreted as a satire by a poet on his lord and patron, each referenced in a couplet. Common causes for satire were a lord's lack of hospitality or generosity, and this seems to be the topic here, cast as a warning to have the table well set. The poet's name was Flann mac Lonain and his patronym could be interpreted as 'son of the blackbird' and then encrypted by substituting

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[41]   *Sanas Chormaic*, ed. Stokes 1868: 145, ed. Meyer 1913: 98, No. 1103.
[42]   Translation adapted from Stokes 1868, and Robinson 1912: 112, n. 69.

rer (plus a diminutive suffix) for *lon.* The prince was Finnguine, also called *Cenn-gegain* 'head of a little goose,' perhaps less alien as 'gosling-head.' But the epithet finds only a partial match in *chendgucáin* 'little head,' although the precise form of the hypocoristic epithet does hint at another *g-* word, *gégán* 'gosling.' Both the move in scale from human to avian stature, and the interplay between base nominal forms and diminutive endings downsize the poet and patron, and serve the comic purpose, where the poet's needs are, grandiosely, "every good thing."

Cormac's Glossary offers another, more explicit and more vicious example, in the entry for *gaire* 'short life,' etymologized as *gair* + *re* 'short space.' King Caíar is apostrophized by the poet Néde and then a series of rhyming, negatively charged words, *maile* 'evil,' *baire* 'death,' *gaire* 'short life,' pun on this name while other alliterating words list the catastrophes the poet calls down on the errant king.[43]

We find a similar situation in the Latin literature of Ireland, where play on an author's name, with recourse to both the Latin and Irish languages, was a common means to give an air of pseudonymity and spurious greater authority to a learned work, while the writer's identity could be worked out by an insider public. For this Michael Herren (1996: 122) coined the self-referential term "punonym." From Virgilius Maro, a native or resident of Ireland, we learn the Late Latin term *scinderatio fonorum* (< classical Latin *scindo* 'part, divide, separate') 'division of sounds,' which perfectly matches the native *estarscarad* 'dividing,' although we cannot state with certainty the direction of the loan.[44] In Latin, too, both phonic and semantic word-play are covered by the term. Such word divi-

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[43] Ed. Meyer, 1913: 58-59, No. 698; trans. Stokes 1868: 87; quoted from Williams 1992: 31.

[44] Virgilio Marone grammatico, *Epitomi ed Epistole*, ed. G. Polara 1979: 128-45, superseding Virgilius Maro, *Opera*, ed. Ioannes Huemer 1886: 76-82, as cited in Herren 1996: 125-26. See Ó Cróinín 1989, and his briefer comment in 2005: 388-89. Cogent remarks in Williams '*Scinderatio*'.

sion was one further means to achieve a hermetic, mannered Latin style accessible only to a literary elite. Virgilius Maro is the author of various literary spoofs and some of his examples of word division are either spuriously attributed to well known authors or to authorities he created on the spot. Still, the vernacular examples and other evidence point to a trope sufficiently well established that a whimsical learned writer could have a bit of fun with it, while satirizing the overfussiness of Latin pedagogy ("What is the vocative form of *ego*?") and expect his audience to join in. Thus, as well as such general parallels as between Snorri's *folgit mál* and the Irish *bérla fortchide,* both of which mean 'obscure language' (cf. Occitan *trobar clus*), we have in *scinderatio fonorum* and *etarscarad* very close equivalents to Norse *ofljóst.*

Verbal Magic, Pagansim, and the New Christian Order

In medieval Ireland the composers of satirical and defamatory poetry (*cáinti*) were associated with institutions that were condemned by the church, e.g., the *fiana,* bands of well-born unmarried young men who lived semi-delinquent lives on society's fringes before coming into property and status. The *fiana* are romanticized in the narrative cycle associated with Finn Mac Cumail but do seem to have had a historical existence.[45] Ecclesiastical condemnation of satire, in Ireland as in Iceland, would have been in part due to its threat to social order but also, although our available evidence is much less explicit in this respect, to its supposed reliance on word magic.[46] Belief in the power of words for good and, more importantly, ill is widespread and we have seen that the line between satire and curse is easily crossed, the descriptive words judged able to effect a change in reality.

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[45]   Relevant here are Sharpe 1979, McCone 1986, and Carney 2005: 454.

[46]   Consult Robinson 1912, Meroney 1950, and McCone 1989.

The conversion of Iceland to Christianity had far-reaching consequences for poetry, including courting and defamatory verse, which was already legally marginalized. The entire apparatus of mythological allusions that was also an important constituent in kennings was lost, as was the rarified lexical register and disjointed syntax. "It is the ambiguous and recondite nature of skaldic diction that will sound discordantly for clerical poets of the ... [fourteenth] century."[47] One can imagine that name encryption would fall early before the need for Christian clarity, as expressed, for example, in the poem *Lilja*.[48] Theorists and anthologists of traditional skaldic forms like Snorri and Óláfr are silent on the subject of the possible christianization of the poetic agenda but there is a telling scene between the missionary king Óláfr Tryggvason and the Icelandic poet Hallfreðr, who has joined his retinue. The king has him compose verse and then criticizes it for its residual pagan content and style. With his stanzas getting more and more plain and straighforward, Hallfreðr works his way through neutrality to a statement of Christian faith, to the king's satisfaction.[49] But such evidence is rare. There is, however, one scene in *Njáls saga* that would seem to have at least the potential to inform us, in symbolic fashion, of pagan poetry's stand against the encroaching new faith.

Missionary efforts in Iceland were led by Þangbrandr, likely a Saxon cleric. The name is not Norse but so recast could be etymologized as *þang + brandr*. Such a 'sword of the seaweed' would be a kenning for 'fish,' an initially cryptic christological symbol. Opposition to the proselytizing, according to the saga, came pre-eminently from sorcerers and poets, but was put down with un-Christian force. Þorvaldr *inn veili*, 'the Ailing,' gathered a troop to stand against the missionary and his new allies, and sent a verse to the

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[47] Quinn 1994: 75.

[48] Cited in Quinn 1994: 89.

[49] *Hallfreðar saga,* 1939, Ch. 6, stanzas 8-13.

poet Úlfr Uggason inviting him to join him. Þorvaldr contrasts the wolf (Úlfr), who is his addressee, with the cleric, *argr goðvargr* 'effeminate/sodomitic wolf to the [pagan] gods.'[50] This second wolf-word has overtones of the outlaw and it is Christian opposition to the revered heathen deities that is addressed. But Úlfr is wary of being drawn into the fray, especially on the losing side, and characterizes himself, in a return stanza, as a canny fish that will not take the fly. He and Þangbrandr are wolves in Þorvaldr's verse, but he joins the 'sword of the tang' in his own verse, and swims with the school.[51] Yet, it should be noted that neither Þangbrandr's nor Úlfr's name seems to be encoded in the first stanza and in the second the poet's fish image may be fortuitous rather than reflective of an awareness of a poetic etymology for the name of the foreigner. This same narrative context has both scurrilous verse rejecting the old gods, Óðinn and Freyja, and conventional verses by a female sorcerer attributing the loss at sea of Þangbrandr's ship to the intervention of Þórr, otherwise the tutelary deity of pagan seafarers.

Ofljóst: 'too clear' or 'struck off'?

Although both the basic technique and the satiric purposes to which Norse onomastic punning was put, plus its legal and, broadly speaking, religious status, have invited the consideration of a possible loan from Irish literary culture, one might legitimately wonder, in the absence of other, perhaps more readily assimilated features such as meter and rhyme, how such a complex trope might have been transferred. Or is it really that complex? Puns seem to occur without premeditation, that is, without conscious construction or consideration of the two levels of meaning, the ostensible literal signification and the often mocking or ridiculous subtext, in a men-

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50   *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 1954, Ch. 102, stanza 7.
51   *Brennu-Njáls saga,* 1954, Ch. 102, stanza 78.

tal process perhaps not dissimilar to that which allows us spontaneously to coin and understand metaphors. And their origins seem to lie clearly in speech, orality not literacy. Puns are as readily understood by the public, if not always appreciated, as the conventional groan after a "bad" pun attests. Written puns lack the important social context and clearly lack the punch of the impromptu witticism. Perhaps the trope, in a sense subjacent in the conventions of most languages as simple punning, just needed a little cultural push (from within the literary tradition or from without) to be adopted as a distinct and–to judge from the legal context–feared if not all that common stylistic device.[52]

The Norse term for the trope considered here is *ofljóst*. It has generally been glossed 'too clear' and understood as a wry understatement on a poetic technique that in reality was far from clear, until the riddle had once been solved. But clarity of significance may not have been the original meaning; the basic sense of *ljóss* is clear and bright in the chromatic and optical sense. Perhaps there was some affective value, such as that associated with the English word *flashy*, thus making it another virtuoso trope, but not one especially valued because of the stigma that attached to its use in courting and defamatory poetry. Yet, with no extended comment on the figure, we are perhaps best advised to assume the simplest meaning, something like 'apparent,' by which was meant that the apparent superficial meaning, deceptively too accessible, was not the true one but that other interpretive strategies, like the lateral thinking of word association, were needed.

If we were to translate Irish *scaraid* (third person singular verb forms are conventionally cited for Irish) or Latin *scindo* 'part, separate' into Old Norse we might turn to the verb *leysa* 'loosen, untie'. With a prefix *af-*, the nominal form *aflausn* was used in the language

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[52]   Still an undertheorized subject, puns and their congeners are addressed in Redfern 2005.

of the Church to mean 'absolution.' But a form based on the past participle such as **aflest* 'divided, separated' is only a hop, skip and bit of word play from the attested *afljóst* 'too clear.' A similar case can be made with point of departure in the verb *ljósta* 'to strike.' With the appropriate verbal prefix, a past participle such as *aflostinn* could equally well have been coined to reflect Latin *scinderatio* or the Irish verbal noun *etarscarad*. *Aflostinn* 'cloven off' as the antecedent of *ofljóst* would also be at home in the imagery that associated Norse poetic composition with woodworking.[53] On the basis of our available evidence, a possible loan from the learned culture of Ireland via the cosmopolitain port towns of Ireland, or even Orkney, into the pre-literate northern world, with or without subsequent folk etymologizing, can only be proposed as the subject of ongoing inquiry. But if *ofljóst* 'too bright' does derive from *etarscarad /scinderatio*, via some form such as *aflostinn* or another, it represents a meta-instance of self-referentiality, the naming of the trope of paronomasia replicating the process it designates.

Conclusion

In closing, the onomastic puns in Rögnvaldr's first stanza for and about Ermengard are comparable to those in Egill Skallagrímsson and other skalds, and such word play was part of the general literary culture of twelfth-century Icelanders and Scandinavians, both poets and their publics. Its associations were often with legally marginalized practices such as courting or defamatory verse. The practice also incorporated a greater degree of self-referentiality than has been previously recognized, both through the encryption of the poet's own name on occasion and through clues to paronomasia by references to clarity in the poetry or, in the sagas with verse, in the surrounding prose. The trope *ofljóst* finds a far-reaching correspondence in early medieval Ireland, both in its intentions and mechan-

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[53] Sayers 2002.

ics, and in its status before the law. In this, the archaic function of the poet as arbiter of praise and censure takes a specialized and socially condemned turn. Yet even if situated on the social margin, this word-play served the ends of cultural cohesion, since it co-opted its public, obliging an investment of mental effort, and returning the pleasure of sharing in preferred knowledge. As noted, most of the hearers, but not all, would have been on the side of the poet.

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