

Strategies of Skaldic Poets for Producing, Protecting, and Profiting from Capitals of Cognition and Recognition

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CAPITALS OF COGNITION AND RECOGNITION – DIFFERENCES AND CONNECTIONS

In all societies marked by at least a rudimentary division of labor, including the labor of domination, there are actors whose position, influence, and authority depend upon disproportionate control over cultural as opposed to economic or martial resources. In other words, there is a split between, on the one hand, elite agents who invest in wealth and/or physical force as the bases for their power and, on the other hand, those who focus on intellectual and artistic production, and on fostering conditions wherein others will consume what they produce. This paper's aim is to analyze some of the social – positioning and profit – producing strategies employed over time by the type of cultural specialist in viking age and medieval Norse society who we are in the best position to study, namely skaldic poets, particularly Icelanders who acted as court poets throughout Scandinavia and the British Isles, but especially in Norway.¹ Before I begin this analysis, I will discuss how Pierre Bourdieu, whose notions

¹ For a fairly recent overview, see M. Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* (Cambridge, 2005). The entire corpus of skaldic poetry is currently being edited and translated anew in an ongoing series, eventually to comprise nine volumes, published by Brepols; for an introduction to the poetry and its practitioners, see the series' 'General Introduction', in *Poetry From the Kings' Sagas 1*, ed. D. Whaley, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 1 (Turnhout, 2012), pp. xiii–xciii. For surveys of both skaldic poetry and eddic poetry (a simpler form of poetry that is usually anonymous, more narrative and didactic in form, and more often con-

of cultural and other forms of capital I will employ, defines these and related concepts, and discusses their interrelations.

Bourdieu uses the term ‘capital’ to refer to properties attached or ascribed to agents that function as convertible resources in social arenas. Capital is, in brief, ‘a social *power* relation’.² Cultural capital is one of Bourdieu’s four major species of capital, the others being economic, social, and symbolic capital. Cultural capital is essentially any convertible resource that is based in cognition, and thus comprises knowledge (or information), know-how (or skills, talents, abilities, and even habits), and dispositions (or tastes, i.e., competences related to discernment, evaluation, and consumption).³ Clearly, cultural capital does not just matter to actors in fields of cultural production, such as those of education, science, art, law, or religion, but factors into most social interactions and helps to position agents within total social spaces. That this is so becomes particularly clear when we focus attention on tastes, or dispositions to favor, purchase, consume, and display certain objects or engage in certain activities. In short, most of us, particularly participants in consumer economies, continually convert much of our economic capital into cultural capital, e.g., possessions such as books and entertainment media, means of property and body maintenance and enhancement, forms of recreation, food, modes and styles of transportation, pets, and so on, all of which contribute to our placement by ourselves and others in ‘a social hierarchy of ... consumers’ in which ‘[t]aste classifies, and ... classifies the classifier’.⁴

As these comments begin to suggest, it can prove difficult in practice to separate cultural capital from symbolic capital, even if they should be kept analytically distinct. While some users of Bourdieu’s ideas collapse these concepts, usually by treating symbolic capital as an umbrella category into which cultural and social types are subsumed, Bourdieu’s own discussions do not allow for this. To quote one of his attempts to describe the species of capital and their interrelations, these are,

principally, economic capital ..., cultural capital and social capital, as well as symbolic capital, commonly called prestige, reputation, fame, etc., which is the form assumed by these different

cerned with mythical and legendary content), and scholarship on each type, see J. Harris, ‘Eddic Poetry’ and R. Frank, ‘Skaldic Poetry’, both in C.J. Clover and J. Lindow (eds), *Old-Norse Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, *Islandica* 45 (Ithaca, 1985), pp. 68–156, 157–96; and T. Gunnell, ‘Eddic Poetry’ and D. Whaley, ‘Skaldic Poetry’, both in R. McTurk (ed.), *A Companion to Old Norse–Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Maldon, MA, 2005), pp. 82–100, 479–502.

² P. Bourdieu, *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*, trans. L.C. Clough (Stanford, 1996), p. 264. All emphases in quotations of Bourdieu are original.

³ See comments in R. Johnson, ‘Editor’s Introduction: Pierre Bourdieu on Art, Literature and Culture’, in P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. and introd. R. Johnson (New York, 1993), pp. 1–25, at p. 7.

⁴ P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. R. Nice (Cambridge, MA, 1984), pp. 1, 6.

kinds of capital when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate... Symbolic capital ... is nothing other than capital, of whatever kind, ... when it is known and recognized as self-evident.⁵

He also writes that ‘a capital (or power) becomes symbolic capital... only when it is *misrecognized* in its arbitrary truth as capital and *recognized* as legitimate’.⁶ Thus, while cultural capital is a matter of *cognition*, of the substance of what gets into one’s head and the uses to which one can put it, symbolic capital is a matter of *recognition*, of the (mis)perception that qualities and resources that one possesses or controls are not just contingent, accidental, and thus arbitrary acquisitions, but rightfully held – because inherent, deserved, or legitimately earned or bestowed – properties that attest to one’s intrinsic or achieved worth or worthiness.⁷

Yet, we have seen in matters of taste how readily, even automatically, an agent’s cognition about what is worth having and pursuing becomes the subject of recognition by others, i.e., is converted into ‘positive or negative symbolic capital’.⁸ There are other respects in which cultural and symbolic capital are difficult to disentangle. One has to do with the fact that cultural capital ‘is predisposed to function as symbolic capital’ owing to how it ‘manages to combine the prestige of innate property with the merits of acquisition’.⁹ This suggests that it is easier to set aside an agent’s economic or social capital when forming a judgment of his or her person than it is to perform a similar mental operation in the case of cultural capital. To put it more concretely, it is fairly common for us to recognize the power of someone’s wealth, family name, or allies while withholding respect from the person, and thus to see him or her as unworthy, undeserving, or simply a lucky beneficiary of such resources. It is, on the other hand, generally difficult for us – particularly those of us whose own social being is largely founded in cultural capital – not to see a person who can read, write, speak, calculate, reason, and/or produce and consume art competently or expertly as ‘smart’, ‘bright’, ‘intelligent’, ‘creative’, and so on, rather than just, as Bourdieu would have it, as one more case of a contingent concentration of capital in and around a biological agent occupying an available social coordinate.

Another reason why cultural capital and symbolic capital are so intertwined is that an agent’s accruing of the latter is not a passive process dependent wholly upon others’ mental operations. On the contrary, the ability to get others to recognize the value of what one has and is ought to be regarded

⁵ P. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. and intro. J.B. Thompson, trans. G. Raymond and M. Adamson (Cambridge, MA, 1991), pp. 230, 238.

⁶ P. Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, trans. M. Adamson (Stanford, 1990), p. 112.

⁷ Bourdieu did sometimes speak of symbolic capital in and of itself as ‘capital founded on cognition... and recognition’ (*ibid.*, p. 22). This simply indicates, however, that all capital has to be cognized, i.e., perceived and conceived, before it can be recognized, i.e., assigned valued; this is as true for economic or any other sort of capital as it is for symbolic capital. At any rate, I am using ‘cognitive capital’ in a more specific sense in this paper.

⁸ P. Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Stanford, 1994), p. 104.

⁹ P. Bourdieu, ‘The Forms of Capital’, in J.G. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York, 1986), pp. 241–58, at p. 245.

as just that, as an ability or talent that must be acquired, cultivated, and deployed like any other. What is more, as Bourdieu implied and Scott Lash has argued explicitly, this particular type of cultural capital or habitus (Lash suggests, rightly I think, that the latter consists of nothing more or less than the former¹⁰) may be the most crucial to have when it comes to profiting or ‘winning’ in any social arena. To make this point, Lash uses the example of the modern scientific field, which for Bourdieu represented ‘the paradigm case of autonomy’, since it has to a considerable extent been able to define its own standards of interest, value, and success – in short, what counts as scientific capital.¹¹ ‘Yet’, Lash writes,

the main stake in the scientific field, according to Bourdieu, is not the production of valid statements but the ‘socially recogni[s]ed capacity to speak and act legitimately’ ...[,] the power to draw the limits of the field, to decide who is in and who is out. The stake then is the ‘monopoly’ of ‘scientific competence’ or ‘authority’ ... The latter is less a form of cultural capital of scientific competences than a form of symbolic capital, based on ... prestige The habitus that would enable this sort of accumulation is not one primarily structured by scientific competence but one attuned to the accumulation of symbolic capital.¹²

If Lash is correct, then all fields of cultural production reduce to struggles for recognition; to stick with the present example, one may be, by virtue of possessing cognitive properties and enacting practices that exemplify scientific standards, the world’s best scientist, but this objective condition will result in little or no profit without others’ subjective recognition that this is so. And as no one laboring in a field of intellectual production needs to be told, expertise and recognition do not always go hand in hand (Otherwise, why would we all be encouraged to master, in addition to our specific areas, the arts of ‘networking’ and ‘selling ourselves?’). The two main things to keep in mind here, however, are, first, that knowing what counts as, being disposed to seek, and proving able to gain and retain capitals of recognition must be understood as themselves capitals of cognition, and, second, that this sort of cultural capital is the most universal and perhaps most important, seeing as symbolic capital is a stake in every social space, no matter how complex/differentiated or simple/undifferentiated it is.¹³

¹⁰ S. Lash, ‘Pierre Bourdieu: Cultural Economy and Social Change’, in C. Calhoun, E. LiPuma, and M. Postone (eds), *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives* (Chicago, 1993), pp. 193–211, at p. 197. Bourdieu has referred to the habitus as both ‘a mental structure’ and ‘a socially constituted cognitive capacity’; see, respectively, Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, p. 66, and Bourdieu, ‘Forms of Capital’, p. 255, note 3.

¹¹ S. Lash, ‘Pierre Bourdieu: Cultural Economy and Social Change’, p. 198.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 199; though Lash cites ‘1975: 26ff.’, it looks like he is actually quoting (inaccurately) from p. 19 of P. Bourdieu, ‘The Specificity of the Scientific Field and the Social Conditions of the Progress of Reason’, *Social Science Information* 14 (1975), pp. 19–47.

¹³ ‘[S]trategies oriented towards the accumulation of symbolic capital ... are found in all social formations’; P. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. R. Nice (Stanford, 1990), p. 130.

A last way I will mention in which cultural capital and symbolic capital tend to manifest together, or in which the latter tends to follow the former, involves the consecratory or legitimating functions of cultural capital and cultural specialists. Cultural capital not only tends to legitimate itself, but agents' possession of it – especially when this is certified by institutions with authority over cultural capital's definition and circulation – tends to legitimate their control over other sorts of capital as well, e.g., economic, political, or martial forms. Bourdieu sees this as the primary if latent function of educational institutions, particularly modern ones. He thus speaks of 'the entirely practical work of the legitimation of power and, more broadly, of sociodicy (the justification of society), which dominants always and everywhere demand of the educational institutions to which they entrust their heirs', and goes on to argue that while

the school plays a crucial role in the distribution of knowledge and know-how, ... it is equally clear that it also contributes ... in the distribution of power and privilege and to the legitimation of this distribution. It is currently the school that has the responsibility for performing the magical action of consecration (often entrusted to religious authorities in other domains) that consists in effecting a series of more or less arbitrary breaks in the social continuum and in legitimating these breaks through symbolic acts that sanction and ratify them, establishing them as consistent with the nature of things and hierarchy of beings.¹⁴

Thus, cultural specialists serve those whose power lies in more objective or tangible forms of capital by avowing that the latter are worthy of, and not just fortunate to have, these resources, because they have shown themselves to be, through a potent combination of innate gifts and honest labor, among their society's best and brightest. The effectiveness of consecration by cultural specialists depends partly upon the degree of autonomy granted to them to dictate standards of value within their proper spheres. This is a point to which I will return.

Having discussed how cultural capital is different from symbolic capital, as well as the tendency for these to come as a package or for the former to give rise to the latter, I return to my paper's main topic, namely how Norse poets or *skálds* (hereafter anglicized as skalds) produced, protected, and profited from the capitals of cognition and recognition to which they owed their prestige, authority, and, indeed, their very social being as poets. I will examine how each of the major components of cognition – knowledge, know-how, and taste or discernment – factored into skalds' efforts to capitalize on their poetry. First, however, I will discuss a strategy that, while it has not come up thus far, is among the ways in which poets and other cultural producers in many contexts seek to convince others of the value of what they offer. It can be described as a direct attempt to gain a capital of recognition for one's art, apart from or before factoring in any of its cultural or cognitive characteristics. This strategy is mystification, in the form of claims to superhuman origin and/or divine inspiration for one's practices.

¹⁴ Bourdieu, *State Nobility*, pp. 74, 116.

MYSTIFYING POETIC PRODUCTION

Aside from in relatively infrequent discussions of religious capital, Bourdieu did not much address cultural production that claimed to be more than just a human activity.¹⁵ In the case of skalds, however, we have cultural producers who, as suggested by evidence dating from or describing the period before Scandinavia's Christianization, that is, before around the year 1000, claimed charismatic sources and qualities for their art. These claims are rooted in the Norse myth of the origins of the mead of poetry, found in its fullest form in *Skáldskaparmál* ('The Language of Poetry'), the third major section of the *Edda*, a textbook on heathen myth and skaldic poetry ascribed to the Icelandic chieftain, skald, and saga-author Snorri Sturluson (1178/9–1241), and produced probably in the 1220s.¹⁶ In this text, the ability to compose poetry is traced to a wondrous mead, made by dwarves from the blood mixed with honey of the eminently wise being Kvasir, who was himself formed from the intermingled saliva of the two tribes of gods. The chief god Óðinn procured this mead after a series of adventures from a giant named Suttungr. It is said of the mead that 'whoever drinks from it becomes a poet or learned man', and Snorri ends the myth by saying that 'Óðinn gave Suttungr's mead to the *æsir* and to those men who know how to compose. Thus we call poetry Óðinn's booty or find, and his drink and his gift'.¹⁷

While nobody believed in the thirteenth-century version of this myth that Snorri presents, evidence suggests that heathen skalds promoted its basic claims of superhuman origin and divine inspiration for their art.¹⁸ In addition to portions of the eddic poem *Hávamál* ('The Sayings of Hár [or the High One, i.e., Óðinn]') that reference Óðinn's acquisition of the mead, there are numerous kennings used by skalds that name poetry using elements of this myth.¹⁹ A *kennning* is a poetic circumlocution that

¹⁵ See especially P. Bourdieu, 'Legitimation and Structured Interests in Weber's Sociology of Religion', trans. C. Turner, in S. Whimster and S. Lash (eds), *Max Weber: Rationality and Modernity* (London, 1987), pp. 119–36, and P. Bourdieu, 'Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field', trans. J.B. Burnside, C. Calhoun, and L. Florence, *Comparative Social Research* 13 (1991), pp. 1–44.

¹⁶ For an extended analysis of Snorri Sturluson's production of the *Edda* using Bourdieu's concepts, see K.J. Wanner, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda: The Conversion of Cultural Capital in Medieval Scandinavia*, Toronto Old Norse–Icelandic Studies 4 (Toronto, 2008).

¹⁷ *Skáldskaparmál* ch. G57–8, in Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, ed. A. Faulkes, 2 vols (London, 1998), I, 3, 5: 'hverr er af drekkir verðr skáld eða fræðamaðr'; 'Suttunga mjöd gaf Óðinn Ásunum ok þeim mönnum er yrkja kunnu. Því köllum v[ér] skáldskapinn feng Óðins ok fund ok drykk hans ok gjöf hans'. All subsequent page number references to *Skáldskaparmál* are to volume one. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted, though I claim no originality for them. The first quotation's translation has been adapted slightly from Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. A. Faulkes (London: 1987), p. 62.

¹⁸ See my fuller discussion supporting this conclusion in K.J. Wanner, 'Skapan í Skáldskap ok Skáldskaparskapan: Creation in and Creation of Norse Poetry', *Arkiv für Religionsgeschichte* 13 (2011), pp. 127–49, at 144–7.

¹⁹ See *Hávamál* stt. 104–10, 140, in *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern, vol. 1: Text*, ed. G. Neckel, 5th edn, rev. H. Kuhn (Heidelberg, 1983), pp. 33–4, 40.

refers to things without directly naming them by using a nominative base-word paired with one or more genitive determinants. Here are examples of such kennings drawn from two tenth-century verses by heathen skalds, with kenning referents identified in brackets: one skald declaims that he brings his patron ‘Hildir’s noise’s [BATTLE’S] maker’s [ÓÐINN’S] fjord–mind’s [BREAST’S] liquid [POETRY]’ and ‘Grímnir’s [i.e., Óðinn’s] gift [POETRY]’, while the other offers up ‘Kvasir’s blood [POETRY]’ and ‘fjord–bone’s [MOUNTAIN’S OR STONE’S] men’s [DWARVES]’ yeast–surf [MEAD > POETRY].²⁰ Another indication that skalds mystified the wellsprings of their art is that, until there started to appear instructional treatises like the *Edda*, there is no extant textual evidence for skalds’ training.²¹ In other words, well into the Christian era, the fact that the ability to make skaldic poetry was acquired through human labor seems to have gone unacknowledged.²² There are also accounts of men gaining the ability to compose through paranormal means, such as sleeping on a poet’s burial mound or eating a magical fish, and of preternaturally precocious mastery of poetry, such as when Egill Skalla-Grímsson is supposed to have employed skaldic meters by age three, although these accounts are late and questionable as evidence for what pre-Christians thought about poets and how they acquired their art.²³

To sum up this brief discussion, there seems enough evidence to conclude that pre-Christian skalds were serious about the charismatic claims they made for their poetry. Furthermore, like all claims of transcendent contributions to what otherwise must be regarded as merely human doings, these claims amounted to an attempt to convert cultural production directly into symbolic capital, since there are few better ways to ensure that others will regard one’s talents as legitimate, or one’s pronouncements as worthy of being heard, heeded, and rewarded, than by persuading them that these are gifts from the gods. Still, I do not want to overstate these claims’ importance to efforts to capitalize on poetry. As a number of scholars have argued, there is something rather perfunctory about references to poetry as ‘Óðinn’s mead’ and the like in late heathen-period poetry (and all extant heathen poetry can be considered late), and the fact that skalds continued to use such kennings even after they, their patrons, and their society had become Christian may suggest that they were not being

²⁰ Úlfir Uggason, *Húsdrápa* st. 1, in Snorri Sturluson, *The Uppsala Edda: DG 11 4to*, ed. Heimir Pálsson, trans. A. Faulkes (London, 2012), p. 138: ‘Hildar herreifum . . . geðfjarðar lá’, ‘gjöf Grímnis’; Einarr skálaglamm Helgason, *Vellekla* st. 1, ed. E. Marold, *et al.*, in *Poetry From the Kings’ Sagas 1*, p. 283: ‘Kvasis dreyra’, ‘fyrða fjarðleggjar brim dreggjjar’. The translation of Einarr’s stanza is essentially from Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 70. I have adopted the style of indicating kenning referents used in the Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages series. Neither here nor elsewhere do I indicate line divisions in quotations of poetry.

²¹ The closest that a poetic source comes to acknowledging skaldic training is Hofgarða-Refr Gestsson’s expression of gratitude in the mid-eleventh century to another man for bringing him ‘to the holy cup of the raven-god’ (*Skáldskaparmál* ch. 2, ed. Faulkes, p. 7: ‘at helgu fulli hrafn-Ásar’, that is, to Óðinn’s mead, or poetry).

²² See, e.g., discussions in E. Gurevich, “Ok var it mesta skáld”: Some Observations on the Problem of Skaldic Training’, *Collegium Medievale* 9 (1996), pp. 57–71; and J. Quinn, ‘Eddu list: The Emergence of Skaldic Pedagogy in Medieval Iceland’, *Alvissmál* 4 (1994 [1995]), pp. 69–92.

²³ See, respectively, *Dorleifs þáttur jarlsskálds* ch. 8, in *Eyfirðinga sögur*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, Íslenzk fornrit 9 (Reykjavík, 1956), pp. 227–9; what is labeled ‘Viðbætur við Olafs Sögu hins helga’ ch. 8, in *Flateyjarbók: En samling af norske konge-sagaer*, ed. Guðbrandur Vigfússon and C.R. Unger, 3 vols (Oslo: 1860–8), III, 243; and *Egils saga* ch. 31, in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, Íslenzk fornrit 2 (Reykjavík, 1933), pp. 80–3.

taken terribly literally.²⁴ It is also worth observing that post-conversion court poets generally failed to make what would seem to be the obvious move of substituting God for Óðinn as the purported source of their inspired verse, though, as we will see, other sorts of skalds were not as hesitant to do so.

And finally, it seems to have been the case in practice that, rather than the claim to inspiration certifying the quality of one's verse, it was the quality of one's verse that was supposed to testify to the fact that it was god-given. For, as *Skáldskaparmál* also relates, Óðinn procured the mead by slurping it up out of Suttungr's vats. He then took the shape of an eagle and fled, with the giant, also in eagle's form, in pursuit. With Suttungr gaining ground on him, Óðinn was forced to send 'some of the mead backward, and of that nothing was saved. That is had by whoever wants it, and we call that the rhymesters' portion'.²⁵ If Snorri's myth is trusted to tell us what skalds thought of their art – and not everyone is sure it can be, though there is some evidence of older poets knowing this element of the story²⁶ – then *all* versified speech was traced to the same mythical liquid. The difference was that some poetry resulted from Óðinn ladling out the mead as a sign of his favor, while some had to be made by siphoning up the eagle-shit that the god had deposited unceremoniously on the ground. The only way to tell which verse was which, however, was to taste it for oneself. When it came to the inspirational legitimacy or supernatural pedigree of poetry, the proof was in the pudding, not external to it. This remained so, I contend, even after the myth of poetry's origins could no longer be taken completely seriously; that is, poetry continued to be judged for what it was, not for what it claimed to be. To see on what grounds it was judged and why it was considered of value, we must now shift attention from questions of recognition back to matters of cognition, and examine how skalds sought to profit from their poetry by offering or displaying the cognitive components of know-how, knowledge, and taste or discernment. Each of these, I will argue, was productive in turn of what can be called profits of distinction, information, and consecration.

²⁴ See A. Faulkes, *What Was Viking Poetry For?: Inaugural lecture delivered on 27th April 1993 in the University of Birmingham* (Birmingham, 1993), p. 21; D. Whaley, 'The "Conversion Verses" in *Hallfreðar saga*: Authentic Voice of a Reluctant Christian?', in M. Clunies Ross (ed.), *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society*, Viking Collection 14 (Odense, 2003), pp. 234–57, at p. 251; and Clunies Ross, *History of Old Norse Poetry*, pp. 94–5.

²⁵ *Skáldskaparmál* ch. G58, ed. Faulkes, p. 5: 'hann sendi aþtr suman mjöðinn, ok var þess ekki gætt. Hafði þat hvern er vildi, ok köllum vér þat skáldfífla hlut.

²⁶ For doubts about whether *Skáldskaparmál*'s myth should be trusted, see especially R. Frank, 'Snorri and the Mead of Poetry', in U. Dronke, Guðrún P. Helgadóttir, G.W. Weber, and H. Bekker-Nielsen (eds), *Speculum Norroenum: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre* (Odense, 1981), pp. 155–70. For a twelfth-century, i.e., Christian, skald referring to bad poetry as *leiri ara*, 'eagle's dung', see Þórarinn stuttfeldr's *lausavísa* ('loose-verse') 3, ed. K.E. Gade, in *Poetry From the Kings' Sagas 2*, ed. K.E. Gade, *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 2* (Turnhout, 2009), p. 481.

SKALDIC VERSE AS A SOURCE OF DISTINCTION, INFORMATION, AND CONSECRATION

I begin my discussion of the profit potential of skaldic verse with some astute observations by Bjarne Fidjestøl:

The ordinary user of language aims to be able to produce and communicate an unlimited number of units of meaning with the aid of a small and limited number of signifying units (phonemes). The skald, on the other hand, needs to produce an unlimited number of signifying units (kennings) on the foundation of a small and comparatively limited number of units of meaning (sense-words) ... The skald appears to be the polar opposite, as it were, of the ordinary language-user, because his need for means of expression is of a peculiar kind. Although he is a professional user of language, he has in fact little he needs to say.²⁷

In other words, skalds do not talk of many different things, but they come up with lots of ways to talk about them.²⁸ In this respect, skaldic poems are perhaps not so different from modern popular love songs, in which essentially the same themes and sentiments are endlessly reiterated, but no one seems to mind so long as the tunes and lyrics vary. Both types of compositions are thus evaluated more on form than on content, i.e., not so much for what they say as for how they say it; yet at the same time, it is the message that either art-form conveys that gives it its interest in the first place. This comparison breaks down, however, when we consider that while most romantic pop songs refrain from specifying the loved or desired subject, skalds are not so coy with their audience: most praise poems tell us exactly who the subject is and what about him is worthy of praise. Thus, while a skaldic poem's capacity to act as capital depended to a large extent on evaluations of its form, it also needed to contain certain kinds of information, as well as to show 'good taste', i.e., to be seen as offering a sound evaluation of its subject(s).

Distinguishing quality poetry from doggerel – or, in *Skáldskaparmál's* myth's terms, divine inspiration from eagle-shit – was a responsibility of consumers as well as producers. We see this, for example, when Snorri Sturluson's verses for Jarl Skúli Bárðarson were mocked by some of his own countrymen, who paid another poet to label them 'mud of the carrion-vulture of the sea [EAGLE > BAD POETRY]', and to declare that 'people find fault in the poems'.²⁹ We also see this in sagas when praise poetry's recipients declare that what they have heard was 'well recited' (*vel kveðit*).³⁰

²⁷ B. Fidjestøl, 'The Kenning System. An Attempt at a Linguistic Analysis', in B. Fidjestøl, *Selected Papers*, ed. O.E. Haugen and E. Mundal, trans. P. Foote, The Viking Collection 9 (Odense, 1997), pp. 16–67, at p. 41.

²⁸ Fidjestøl demonstrates this through a statistical study of the specific referents in skaldic court poetry. See *ibid.*

²⁹ Sturla Þórðarson, *Íslendinga saga* ch. 38, in *Sturlunga saga*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason, and Kristján Eldjárn, 2 vols (Reykjavík, 1946), I, 279: 'hrægramms ... sævar ... leir', 'þjóð finnr löst á ljóðum'.

³⁰ See, e.g., *Hallfredar saga* ch. 11, in *Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit 8 (Reykjavík, 1939), p. 195, and *Sneglu-Halla þátr* or *Morkinskinna* ch. 47, in *Morkinskinna I*, ed. Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi

This motif shows that patrons were expected to judge whether a poem was well or poorly composed and/or delivered. Positive appraisals are typically followed immediately by a reward, i.e., by capital conversion. While usually this is into economic or social capital, in the form of gold, weapons, or acceptance into a retinue, the most dramatic example of such conversion is when King Eiríkr blóðøx (blood-axe) Haraldsson grants Egill Skalla-Grímsson his life after he recites a poem praising Eiríkr that becomes known as *Höfuðlausn* ('Head-Ransom').³¹

There is neither space nor – given the availability of many such accounts – need here for an in-depth description of skaldic verse's formal qualities. Suffice it to say that for several centuries before and for several following Christianization, skaldic poetry was the cultural product in Scandinavia most capable of generating

what Bourdieu calls a 'profit of distinction', the capacity of prestigious cultural practices to contribute to the status of elite agents, groups, or institutions. This capacity often depends upon the difficulty or degree of artificiality of the art form in question, and the consequent amount of exposure and training needed to produce or consume it Cultivation of an intricate, artificial form, as measured by distance from everyday speech, is a primary means through which discursive practice generates profit.³²

And as many scholars have averred,

one would be hard-pressed to find a type of poetry more intricate than that of the skalds: it is 'one of the most esoteric art forms that Western man has produced', 'a revelling in *form*, an overemphasis on it', a 'poetry [that] revels in obscurity ... [and] a desire to outdo all competitors in wit and craftsmanship Few meters are more intricate, subtle, or like a straight-jacket than *dróttkvætt* ['court-meter', the form most used in praise poetry].³³

The difficulty of skaldic verse lies in its complex rules governing syllable count and placement of stress, alliteration, and rhyme; its archaic, allusive, and often riddling diction, which sometimes required knowledge of heathen myth and its characters to decipher; and its use of a word order far removed from everyday speech patterns. The result is 'an extremely (almost maximally) artificial

Guðjónsson, *Íslensk fornrit 23* (Reykjavík, 2011), pp. 270–84.

³¹ *Egils saga* chs 60–1, ed. Sigurður Nordal, pp. 183–95.

³² Wanner, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda*, p. 59, quoting Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, p. 34.

³³ *Idem*, quoting D.C. Edwards, 'Clause Arrangement in Skaldic Poetry. I. Clause Arrangement in the *Dróttkvætt* Poetry of the Ninth to Fourteenth Centuries. II. Clause Arrangement in the Poetry of Arnórr jarlaskáld', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 98 (1983), pp. 123–75, at p. 123; L.M. Hollander, *The Skalds* (Princeton, 1945), p. 20 (emphasis in original); and R. Frank, *Old Norse Court Poetry: The Dróttkvætt Stanza*, *Islandica* 42 (Ithaca, 1978), pp. 28, 33.

form of linguistic practice, whose production and consumption relied upon a producer's mastery and an audience's familiarity with a highly refined style of discourse'.³⁴

As noted above, however, while the profits of distinction available to those who mastered skaldic form were significant, value also inhered in the poetry's contents. In short, not just form but also information was at stake. Bourdieu sometimes suggested replacing the term 'cultural capital' with 'informational capital'; for example, he writes with Loïc J.D. Wacquant that 'cultural capital ... should in fact [be] call[ed] *informational capital* to give the notion its full generality'.³⁵ While this substitution seems like it would narrow rather than broaden what this concept covers, that it was proposed underscores how much of what cultural capital amounts to is what one knows, claims to know, and is perceived as knowing. What, then, sorts of information was skaldic poetry supposed to generate, store, and/or transmit, and for whom was this information of value, and why?

While I agree with Fidjestøl that the informational yield of the average skaldic poem is meagre, this may have made elite agents' desire to have facts about themselves appear in these prestigious compositions all the more intense. In pre-Christian Scandinavia, as generally in oral cultures, poetic speech was a primary means for storing, transmitting, and enabling future retrieval of information. In short, one of its chief functions was commemorative, as skalds explicitly recognize. For instance, one tenth-century skald offered 'praise, like a bridge of stone', another promised that his subject's 'memory would live on in "a not easily broken praise pile"', and in the thirteenth century Snorri Sturluson concluded a joint encomium to Norway's king and jarl by wishing, 'May the land, supported by stone, fall into the sea before the rulers' praise'.³⁶ These recurrent references to stone are significant, since the main competition over commemorative services that skalds faced before the advent of written texts was from makers of stone memorials. A monument like the Jelling stone, which records in runes King Haraldr blátonn (bluetooth) Gormsson's claim to have converted the Danes to Christianity, has certainly served for centuries as an effective information-storage device.³⁷ But such monuments can be costly, sites must be found for their installation, and, as objectified capital, they are subject to wear and eventual erasure in ways that cultural or symbolic types of capital existing in embodied or incorporated states, i.e., that is copied or informed in mind after mind, are not. Still, the two media of commemoration were likely to have been more complementary than competitive.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

³⁵ P. Bourdieu and L.J.D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago, 1992), p. 119. See also Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, pp. 41, 45.

³⁶ *Skáldskaparmál* ch. 55, ed. Faulkes, p. 85: 'stillis lof sem steina brú'; *Egils saga* ch. 78, ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 267: 'lofköst ... óbrotgjarn'; and *Háttatal* st. 102, in Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Háttatal*, ed. A. Faulkes, repr. ed. (London, 1999), p. 39: 'Falli fyrr fold í ægi steini studd en stillis lof'. The quotation concerning and translation of Egill's verse is from K.E. Gade, 'Poetry and Its Changing Importance in Medieval Icelandic Culture', in M. Clunies Ross (ed.), *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 42 (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 61–95, at p. 71.

³⁷ For a discussion of the Jelling stone, see B. and P. Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia: From Conversion to Reformation circa 800-1500*, The Nordic Series 17 (Minneapolis, 1993), pp. 14–15, 54–5.

As for the information that praise poetry contained, this tended to consist of basic ‘facts about its subject: name, identity of foes, sites of important battles, genealogy and kin, and, in the case of elegies, place and manner of death’.³⁸ As examples of this, here are parts of two stanzas by Icelanders that report, from different sides, on the same event in Norway’s history, a battle in 961 in which King Hákon góði (the good) Haraldsson was killed by the sons of his late brother, Eiríkr blóðøx. The first stanza by Þórðr Særeksson praises a companion of Hákon:

The army went eager to clash of swords [BATTLE] at Fitjar on Storðr ... And the slinger of the fire of the storm of the troll-woman of the shielding moon of the horse of boathouses [SHIP > SHIELD > AXE > BATTLE > SWORD > WARRIOR] dared to advance next to the Norwegians’ lord.³⁹

The second stanza by Glúmr Geirason praises a nephew of Hákon, Haraldr gráfeldr (greycloak):

Haraldr ... avenged Gamli well ... when the dark falcons of the battle-god [= Óðinn > RAVENS] drink Hákon’s blood across the sea.⁴⁰

Þórðr’s stanza does not name the person being praised, but its prose contexts inform us that it was the Icelander Þórálfr Skólmmsson.⁴¹ Given knowledge of its subject’s identity, the stanza tells us that Þórálfr fought with ‘Hákon at the battle of Fitjar on the island of Storð’.⁴² As for Glúmr’s stanza, it relates that Haraldr, in killing Hákon, avenged Gamli, who we know from other sources was a brother of Haraldr who ‘was killed as he fled from Hákon góði following the battle of Rastarkálfr on the island of Fræði ..., c. 955’.⁴³ Clearly, single stanzas are not usually self-sufficient in terms of conveying relevant information, but serve as nodes in webs of poetically coded and stored information about patrons and their deeds.

Writers of later histories acknowledge skaldic poetry’s importance for preserving information about the time before writing. The most developed such testimony is found in the prologue to the so-called separate saga of King and Saint Óláfr Haraldsson (d. 1030), long attributed to Snorri Sturluson. It reads in part:

³⁸ Wanner, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda*, p. 62.

³⁹ Þórðr Særeksson, *Þórálfs drápa Skólmmssonar* st. 1, ed. K.E. Gade, in *Poetry From the Kings’ Sagas 1*, p. 237: ‘lystr gekk herr til hjörva hnits í Storð á Fitjum... Ok gimslongvir ganga gífrs hlémána drífu nausta blakks it næsta Norðmanna gram þorð?’. The translation is slightly adapted from Gade’s.

⁴⁰ Glúmr Geirason, *lausavísa 1*, ed. D. Whaley, *Poetry From the Kings’ Sagas 1*, p. 266: ‘Vel hefr hefnt ... Haraldr Gamla, es dökkvalir drekka dolgbands fyrir ver handan... Hökunar dreyra’. The translation is Whaley’s.

⁴¹ See Gade’s discussion in *Poetry From the Kings’ Sagas 1*, pp. 236–8.

⁴² K. Heslop and D. Whaley, ‘Introduction to Volume 1’, in *Poetry From the Kings’ Sagas 1*, p. cxcii.

⁴³ D. Whaley, notes to Glúmr Geirason, *lausavísa 1*, in *Poetry From the Kings’ Sagas 1*, p. 267.

[W]hen Haraldr hárfagri [fairhair] was king in Norway, men knew with much greater certainty what to say about the lives of those kings, who in Norway have been. In his days ... there was a great migration from Norway to Iceland. Men then in each summer traded news between these lands, and that was afterwards carried in memory and later kept in stories. Yet what seems to me most reliable is what with clear words is said in poems or other sorts of verse-making, those that were composed about kings or other chieftains, that they themselves heard, or in those funeral-poems, which the skalds presented to their sons. Those words that are fixed in poetry remain the same as they first were, if it is correctly composed, [and] though later one man after another may learn something from it, he cannot alter it. But for those sagas that are spoken, there is a danger that they will not be understood always in one way. And some have no memory, once some time has passed, of what was said to them, and often much changes in memory, and stories become unreliable. It was more than two hundred and twenty years, since Iceland was settled, before men could take here to writing sagas, and that was a long age and a difficult one for sagas not to have changed in oral tradition, if there were not poems, both new and old, from which men can get evidence of what really happened.⁴⁴

One could hardly imagine a more ringing endorsement of the value and trustworthiness of skaldic verse as evidence for the past. It is worth highlighting that poetic form is here argued to guarantee the stability of the information transmitted through time in an oral culture.

Other texts, however, seem more skeptical about poetry's reliability. In *Orkneyinga saga*, an Icelandic text from c. 1200, it is told that some Norsemen on their way to the Holy Land defeated the crew of a Saracen ship. Immediately afterward,

Men talked about those events, that had had there occurred; each told what he thought he had seen. Men also talked about who had first gone up [onto the enemy ship], and they did not agree about that. Then some said, that it would be ridiculous, if they did not all have one story about those great events. It came about that they agreed that Jarl Rögnvaldr should decide the matter; they should all later repeat that. Then the jarl recited: 'First onto the dark

⁴⁴ Prologus to *Óláfs saga ins helga inni sérstaka*, in Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla II*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk fornrit 27 (Reykjavík, 1945), pp. 421–2: 'er Haraldr inn hárfagri var konungr í Nóregi, þá vitu menn miklu górr sannendi at segja frá ævi konunga þeira, er í Nóregi hafa verit. Á hans dögum ... var þá mikil ferð af Nóregi til Íslands. Spurðu menn þá á hverju sumri tíðendi landa þessa í milli, ok var þat síðan í minni fært ok haft eptir til frásagnu. En þó þykki mér þat merkiligast til sannenda, er berum orðum er sagt í kvæðum eða öðrum kveðskap, þeim er svá var ort um konunga eða aðra höfðingja, at þeir sjálfir heyrðu, eða í erfikvæðum þeim, er skáldin færðu sonum þeira. Þau orð, er í kveðskap standa, eru in sömu sem í fyrstu váru, ef rétt er kveðit, þótt hverr maðr hafi síðan numit at öðrum, ok má því ekki breyta. En sögur þær, er sagðar eru, þá er þat hætt, at eigi skilisk öllum á einn veg. En sumir hafa eigi minni, þá er frá líðr, hvernig þeim var sagt, ok gengsk þeim mjök í minni optliga, ok verða frásagnir ómerkiligar. Þat var meirr en tvau hundruð vetra tólfræð, er Ísland var byggt, áðr menn tæki hér sögur at rita, ok var þat löng ævi ok vant, at sögur hefði eigi gengizk í munni, ef eigi væri kvæði, bæði ný ok forn, þau er menn tæki þar af sannendi fræðinnar'.

dromond ... went Auðun enn rauði [‘the red’].⁴⁵

This story has poetry not record knowledge but create it, by establishing an ‘official version’ of events. It thus potentially undermines claims that poetry can be trusted to transmit reliable information. A similar skepticism is perhaps expressed in *Ynglinga saga*, another text that has long – if not entirely securely – been ascribed to Snorri. It says of Óðinn, here euhemerized as a conqueror from Troy, that ‘he spoke so skillfully and smoothly, that it seemed to all who heard him that that alone was true. He talked entirely in rhymes, just as now that is recited which is called poetry (*skáldskapr*)’.⁴⁶ Here too, poetry is a tool of rhetoric rather than reporting: it *makes* what it says *seem* true. Perhaps, however, the relationship of poetry to truth that these texts posit ought to be viewed as more pragmatic than skeptical. After all, how can one tell if what a poem tells of centuries past is true? And what does it matter, practically speaking? A poem’s report can be rejected, but if it is, then there is often nothing left with which to reconstruct the past. On the HBO series *Game of Thrones*, Queen Cersei tells her son Joffrey, ‘Someday, you’ll sit on the throne, and the truth will be what you make it’.⁴⁷ In these sagas, however, it is not kings but those who command poetic speech who are conceded to have this prerogative.

Lastly in this section, I will consider how skalds exercised and sought to profit from a cognitive capacity of discernment. As mentioned above, Bourdieu claims that cultural specialists, wherever they appear, consecrate elites whose power lies in other forms of capital. As Wacquant notes, Bourdieu means for his use of ‘consecration’ to be taken ‘in the strongest sense of the term, that is, it makes ... [things] sacred’.⁴⁸ Court skalds sometimes literally sacralized the subjects of their verse, granting them charismatic legitimation by testifying to their close connections to superhuman beings. For heathens, this could involve claiming divine ancestry for a patron, or that the gods had guided him in his career or in a particular conflict, while Christians could claim that God and/or his saints favored their patrons. To give an example of each, Einarr Helgason in the late tenth century labeled Hákon Sigurðarson ‘Yggr’s [i.e., Óðinn’s] descendant’, and credited the jarl’s victories to ‘the gods’ will’, while Arnórr Þórðarson in the 1040s proclaimed that ‘the shaping guardian of heaven [= God] allotted earth’ in battle to King Magnús Ólafsson.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ *Orkneyinga saga* ch. 88, in *Orkneyinga saga*, ed. Finnbogi Guðmundsson, Íslenzk fornrit 34 (Reykjavík, 1965), p. 227: ‘Menn ræddu um tíðendin, þessi er þar höfðu görzk; sagði þá hverr þat, er sét þóttisk hafa. Ræddu menn ok um, hverr fyrstr hafði upp gengit, ok urðu eigi á þat sáttir. Þá mæltu sumir, at þat væri ómerkiligt, at þeir hefði eigi allir eina sögu frá þeim stórtíðendum. Ok þar kom, at þeir urðu á þat sáttir, at Rögnvaldr jarl skyldi ór skera; skyldi þeir þat síðan allir flytja. Þá kvað jarl: “Gekk á drómund dökvan ... Auðun fyrstr enn rauði”.

⁴⁶ *Ynglinga saga* ch. 6, in Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbarnarson, Íslenzk fornrit 26 (Reykjavík, 1941), p. 17: ‘hann talaði svá snjallt ok slétt, at öllum, er á heyrðu, þótti þat eina satt. Mælti hann allt hendingum, svá sem nú er þat kveðit, er skáldskapr heitir’.

⁴⁷ *Game of Thrones*, ‘Lord Snow’, season 1, episode 3, writ. D. Benioff and D.B. Weiss, dir. B. Kirk (2011).

⁴⁸ L.J.D. Wacquant, ‘Foreword’ to Bourdieu, *State Nobility*, pp. ix–xxii, at p. x.

⁴⁹ Einarr skálaglamm Helgason, *Vellekla* stt. 19 and 8, ed. Marold, et al., in *Poetry From the Kings’ Sagas 1*, pp.

Skalds also consecrated patrons less literally, by representing them as instantiations of aristocratic ideals. In other words, another major function of skaldic praise was to affirm that concrete instances – this king, and what he did at this or that time and place – conformed to exemplars. Like a grade of ‘A’ in school, a praise poem signifies that its recipient has become what s/he is supposed or was meant to be, that s/he has conformed to some pre-existing standard of excellence. Skaldic praise poetry also in this regard has much in common with hagiography, Christian or otherwise. Hagiography’s point is not to record the unique qualities or actions of individuals, but to display its subject’s conformity to an archetype, thereby affirming that s/he is a recipient of charisma. Many of the archetypal qualities of praiseworthy rulers applied in both the pre-Christian and Christian eras, e.g., excellence in war, liberality with gold, and cleverness in speech, while others were specific to one context or the other, such as the claim that a king pleases the gods by promoting sacrifices and keeping open the temples, or, conversely, that he pleases God by ending sacrifices and closing the temples.⁵⁰

To assess how effective the consecration offered by skalds might have been, it is helpful to consider what amount to some sociological axioms offered by Bourdieu. He contends that:

All genuine power acts as symbolic power, the basis of which is, paradoxically, *denial*. It carries with it a demand for recognition that is a demand for misrecognition, addressed to an autonomous agent in a position to grant to power what it grants to itself ... [T]he symbolic efficacy of an act of legitimation increases concomitantly with the ratio of the recognized independence of the consecrator to that of the consecratee It is nearly nonexistent in the case of self-consecration ... or self-praise ...; it is weak when the consecration is carried out by mercenaries ... or accomplices ...; it is also weak when the acts of recognition ... are the object of exchanges that ... [are] transparent ..., the shorter the circuits of exchange and the intervals between the acts of exchange The principle according to which the autonomy of a celebrator is the precondition for the symbolic efficacy of an act of celebration is ... a *positive law* of the way social universes work ... [Thus, t]he prince is only able to get truly effective symbolic service out of his painters, his poets, or his jurists insofar as he gives them the capacity to legislate within their domain.⁵¹

Accepting what Bourdieu here says, the ‘symbolic efficacy’ of skalds’ consecration was relatively weak. This is because the circuit of exchange in question was both short and transparent: in what were usually one-on-one, face-to-face interactions, skalds offered praise, and sometimes charismatic

306, 292: ‘*Teggs niðr*’, ‘*at mun banda*’; and Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson (This is the poet’s name), *Magnússdrápa* st. 10, ed. D. Whaley, in *Poetry From the Kings’ Sagas 2*, p. 219: ‘*skipti skapvörðr himins jörðu*’. The translation of Arnórr’s verse is Whaley’s.

⁵⁰ Compare, e.g., Einarr skálaglamm Helgason, *Vellekla* st. 16, with Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld Óttarsson, *Óláfsdrápa* st. 1, both in *Poetry From the Kings’ Sagas 1*, pp. 303, 387.

⁵¹ Bourdieu, *State Nobility*, pp. 383–5.

legitimation underwritten by a claim to inspiration, and patrons reciprocated in ways that were explicit, public, and usually immediate. Skalds were also often blatant about their desire for, or dissatisfaction at not having received, reward. Snorri Sturluson can be taken to speak for them all when he declaims, ‘What man would hear praise thus recited of one who is slow to give gold and treasures?’⁵² There was also no institutional structure in place – i.e., something akin to a priesthood or university – that could mediate these exchanges, making them appear more impersonal and thus disinterested.

Conversely, there were other factors at work that enhanced the consecratory effectiveness of skaldic discourse. One is that, from the time of Hákon góði in the mid-tenth century, most if not all known court skalds were Icelandic.⁵³ Thus, Icelanders established a veritable monopoly on consecratory services. Part of what may have encouraged this situation is that an Icelander at court was, in a sense, a foreigner. He was neither a subject nor, usually, a relative or prior friend of its lord. Therefore, his evaluation of the patron’s worth could be seen as (relatively) independent, and was more likely itself to be deemed valid and valuable.

Another such factor is that, while there never developed a ‘field of skaldic production’ comparable in autonomy to modern fields of cultural production, skalds certainly, as my discussion has shown, cultivated a complex cultural code that required considerable expertise not only to cognize, and thus produce, but also to recognize, and thus judge. In other words, while skaldic verse was never produced in and for itself, in the way that slogans of autonomous fields such as ‘business is business’ or ‘art for art’s sake’ signify, but instead received its value largely within the Scandinavian field of power, skalds from early in their history established enough of a claim of distinctiveness and distinction for their art that they were able to profit from the perception that they were, relatively speaking, ‘disinterested’ – meaning, in this case, that they were motivated also by aesthetic rather than solely by political and pecuniary interests.

Finally, that skalds enjoyed a degree of autonomy is attested to by their occasional realization of a potential to criticize and correct patrons. The most well-known example of this is Sigvatr Þórðarson’s *Bersöglisvísur* (‘Outspoken Verses’), in which he chastises King Magnús for being vindictive toward enemies of his late father, Saint Óláfr, and describes what is likely to happen if he fails to emulate his more magnanimous predecessors. Sigvatr’s chastisement convinces Magnús to alter his behavior, and he is henceforward known as *inn góði*, ‘the good’.⁵⁴ This and similar episodes illustrate what Bourdieu describes as

⁵² *Háttatal* st. 97, ed. Faulkes, p. 38: ‘*hverr muni heyra hróðr gjöflata seggr svá kveðinn seims ok hnossa?*’

⁵³ For a discussion of this seeming monopolization of skaldic court poetry by Icelanders, with references to relevant scholarship and debate, see Wanner, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda*, pp. 57–8.

⁵⁴ *Magnúss saga ins góða* ch. 16, in Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla III*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk fornrit 28 (Reykjavík, 1951), pp. 26–31.

the *legitimation antinomy* universally encountered by temporal power holders in their relationship with those whose power is associated with the possession of one or another form of cultural capital. The latter, be they clerics or laypersons, are always tempted to use to their own advantage the autonomy that the dominants are compelled to concede to them because it creates the very value of the consecration and legitimation that their ‘spiritual’ interventions in the ‘temporal’ order are able to grant.⁵⁵

To sum up, I have tried in this section to show how and why skaldic poetry was among the most potent forms of cultural or cognitive capital operating in viking age and medieval Scandinavia, especially in terms of generating symbolic or recognitive capital. This conversion was effected using an art-form that combined valued forms of knowledge (of the qualities and deeds of specific patrons), skill (mastery of a highly technical and artificial discourse), and discernment (the capacity to measure patrons against archetypes and ideals), and by entrusting its delivery to agents with relatively high degrees of cultural, social, and political autonomy.

STRATEGIES OF SELF-EFFACEMENT AMONG CHRISTIAN DEVOTIONAL SKALDS: OR, THE DIFFERENCE INSTITUTIONALIZATION MAKES

As a coda and point of contrast to my analysis of court skalds’ strategies for profiting from capitals of cognition and recognition, this concluding section undertakes a briefer but, I hope, instructive discussion of the often very different strategies typical of another kind of skald, namely composers of Christian devotional poetry. By this, I mean vernacular poetry that we know or can assume (since much of it is anonymous) was by clerics and/or monks, and the manifest purpose of which was to praise members of the Trinity and/or saints. Such poetry appeared from the mid-twelfth through the fifteenth centuries.⁵⁶

Superficially, the capital exchange enacted in devotional poetry seems very similar to that which characterizes court poetry. In both cases, skalds offer praise to patrons and request, i.e., expect, rewards. Thus, there seems little to distinguish a heathen poet in the tenth century calling on his patron to ‘enjoy Yggr’s [i.e., Óðinn’s] mead [POETRY]’, so that he in turn ‘can enjoy his [the patron’s] precious gifts’, and a Christian one in the fourteenth century telling his patron, a saint, to ‘rejoice ... in this poem with precious content’, while asking her to ‘grant ... [me] poem-payment’.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Bourdieu, *State Nobility*, p. 387.

⁵⁶ For an overview, see K. Attwood, ‘Christian Poetry’, in McTurk (ed.), *Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, pp. 43–63.

⁵⁷ Einarr skálaglamm Helgason, *Vellekla* st. 36, ed. Marold, et al., in *Poetry From the Kings’ Sagas 1*, p. 328: ‘hljót Yggs mjaðar’, ‘hans mati ... hljóta’; Kálfr Hallsson, *Kátrínardrápa* stt. 51, 49, ed. K. Wolf, in *Poetry on Christian Subjects*, ed. M. Clunies Ross, *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 7* (Turnhout, 2007), pp. 962–3:

When we consider, however, the nature of the actors and rewards involved, the differences appear significant. In the case of court poetry, a living skald presents a living patron (or his heirs) with a poem and gets something ‘real’ in response – and this includes rewards like titles or admission to a retinue, since such symbolic bequests have no less tangible effects than would a gift of gold, the value of which is also subjective/symbolic.⁵⁸ The only imaginary partner – one who does not combine material-biological and symbolic properties but exists only as the latter, as ideas in material actors’ heads – to this exchange is sometimes Óðinn (or the collected gods) as source of charismatic inspiration and/or legitimation. In the case of devotional poetry, however, while the poem and agent offering it are real enough, the patron, whether this is the Father, Christ, Mary, or some other saint, is an imaginary party; furthermore, the reward they offer – usually and above all the grace of forgiveness of sins, or intercession to obtain such – is wholly symbolic, as well as deferred, i.e., its usefulness lies in a projected afterlife. This is not to say that no important social effects derive from declaring and being recognized for a desire to obtain grace for oneself or others. Yet the point remains that one cannot live on grace and promises of salvation in the same way one can by securing gold, weapons, or a place close to a king.

Another way that devotional poetry differs significantly from court poetry is that, instead of a linear chain of exchange, in which a god inspires praise for which a patron then rewards a poet, the former enacts a circular or closed circuit of exchange, in which the source of praise is for all intents and purposes identical with its object. Thus, devotional skalds often insist that they deserve credit for neither the form nor content of what they produce. To give just two examples, both probably from the 1300s, *Brúðskaupsvísur* (‘Wedding-Verses’) implores, ‘[m]ay the prince of men ..., who created people, provide the beginning of the poem, else there will be a lack of words ... Christ, ... govern alone what I shall compose’, and *Lilja* (‘Lily’) declares: ‘there cannot be talk of anything good other than from you, Lord I ask you, maiden and mother, that with your overseeing proper speech may flow in smooth verses from my voice-tools Highest master of all arts, good Jesus ..., grant me to compose and arrange’.⁵⁹ Devotional skalds also often insist that anything they might have produced on their own would have been highly deficient, even offensive, because of the loftiness of the subject matter, and their own sinfulness and/or lack of skill. So, the twelfth-century *Leiðarvísan* (‘Way-Guidance’) states ‘Our ... words will be displeasing ... unless the Lord gives me an abundance

‘við óði mætum efni gless’, ‘veiti kvæðislaun’.

⁵⁸ As Bourdieu states, ‘there is no system, not even the economy, that does not depend to some extent on belief in order to work’. P. Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, trans. R. Nice (London, 1993), p. 17.

⁵⁹ *Brúðskaupsvísur* st. 1, ed. Valgerður Erna Þorvaldsdóttir, in *Poetry on Christian Subjects*, p. 529: ‘Jöfurr gięfi upphaf óðar, sá er skóp þjóð, ella verðr orðfall aldar ... Krist (einn stýrðu ... hvað eg kveða skal)'; *Lilja* stt. 2, 3, and 51, ed. M. Chase, in *Poetry on Christian Subjects*, pp. 563–5, 620–1: ‘inniz ekki annað gott, en af þeir til, drottinn ... Beiði eg þig, mæ og móðir, mínum að fyrir umsjá þína renni mál af raddartólum riettferðugt í vísun sliettum ... Yfir-meistarinn allra lista, Jesús góðr ..., veittu mier að stilla og stýra’. I have used these editors’ translations here as well.

of language for the praise-poem', and *Líknarbraut* ('Path of Mercy'), from the late thirteenth century, tells Christ that 'we ... undertook to relate to the people the power of your Cross in a poem, even though I was poorly equipped to do so. Clearly I am least suited ... to speak of you, the best, on account of mind-fixed sins'.⁶⁰

The last distinctive feature of devotional poetry that I will discuss is that some of its producers began explicitly to reject the value of ornate diction and meter, especially when these threatened to obscure their message. The clearest repudiations of *reglur eddu*, the 'rules of the [i.e., Snorri's] *Edda*', come from three Icelandic churchmen. In the late thirteenth century, Abbot Árni Jónsson states that his 'praise poem [for Bishop Guðmundr Arason of Hólar, r. 1203-37] will be considered very rigid by the headmasters of the Eddic art, to those who wish to seek out and pay heed to learned books' esoteric rules; the clear testimony of sweet writings seems to me fitting for holy men's praise, for kennings increase no man's strength but darken joy', and Abbot Arngrímur Brandsson insists that 'I cared little for the Eddic rules ..., I have only the eagle's mud to offer you, I'm not clever in the company of good poets'.⁶¹ And the aforementioned *Lilja* states near its end:

[I]t is most important that the true sense be rightly understood, though the rule of the *Edda*, quite unclear, might sometimes have been disregarded. Whoever chooses to compose elaborate poetry chooses to present in the poem so many obscure old expressions that may scarcely be counted: I declare this hinders understanding; because one can understand well the plain words here, people will apprehend my clear will.⁶²

As Judy Quinn, whose translations of these verses I have used, observes, instead of 'delight[ing] in the play of meanings [that] ... intricate diction could create, these poets eschew it, relishing instead the modesty *topos* of referring to themselves as unlearned poets'.⁶³ They can also be understood to have been cultivating a different sort of linguistic capital than did court skalds, the value of which

⁶⁰ *Leiðarvísan* st. 3, ed. K. Attwood, in *Poetry on Christian Subjects*, p. 143: 'Ór munu ... óþægilig ... nema mér til mærdar málsnótt fáí dróttinni'; *Líknarbraut* st. 47, ed. G.S. Tate, in *Poetry on Christian Subjects*, p. 282: 'Rédum kraft í kvæði kross þíns fyrir þjóð inna ..., þó at ..., værak allítt til þess fallinn. Sízt em ek samr of baztan sýnt... fyrir lundfasta löstu ... þik ræða'. I have used these editors' translations here as well.

⁶¹ I cite these verses, *Guðmundar drápa* st. 78 and *Guðmundar kvæði byskups* st. 2, respectively, and their translations from Quinn, 'Eddu list', pp. 88-9. The edition of these poems she uses is *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, vols IB, IIB, Rettet tekst (Copenhagen, 1912-15), IIB, 461, 372: 'Yfirmeisturum mun Eddu listar allstirður ... hróður virðaz þeim er vilja svá grafa ok geyma grein klókasta fræðibóka; lofi heilagra líz mér hefja ljós ritninga sætra vitni, en kenningar auka mönnum engan styrk en fagnað myrkvá'; 'Rædda ek lítt reglur Eddu ..., arnar leif hefig yðr at færa, emka ek fróðr hjá skáldum góðum'.

⁶² Again, I cite these verses, *Lilja* stt. 97-8, and their translation as they are found in Quinn, 'Eddu list', p. 89, and thus from *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*, IIB, 415-16: 'varðar mest til allra orða, undirstaðan sé réttlig fundin, eigi glögg þóat eddu regla undan hljóta at víkja stundum. Sá, er óðinn skal vandan velja, velr svá mörg í kvæði at selja hulin fornryðin, at trautt má telja, tel ek þenna svá skilning dvelja; vel því at hér má skýr orð skilja, skili þjóðir minn ljósan vilja'. For a newer edition and alternative translation of these stanzas, both by M. Chase, see *Poetry on Christian Subjects*, pp. 672-3.

⁶³ Quinn, 'Eddu list', p. 89.

derived not from its elaborateness and distance from everyday speech, but from its clarity and simplicity. In short, it was a rhetorical rejection of style, an affirmation that *what* one has to say is more important than *how* one says it. Of course, this rhetoric, like most, was belied partly by practice, since, as Quinn notes, they did bother putting their message into verse, and ‘[t]here were some rules of the *Edda* ... that these poets clearly followed to the letter’.⁶⁴

The devotional poetry’s features that I have described may be labeled strategies of self-effacement, in that they consist largely of efforts by its composers *not* to be seen as the author of what they produced, to avoid appearing to claim credit for, take pride in, or show off with it. Such strategies were alien to skaldic court poets, for whom self-aggrandizement was more the norm. Even court skalds who actively mystified their art’s origins typically claimed their share of credit for the final product and thus their right to a reward: as skalds of Jarl Hákon Sigurðarson put it, ‘we have again produced the gods’ feast [POETRY], the prince’s praise’, and ‘I shall succeed in bailing the bilge-water of Host-Týr’s [i.e., Óðinn’s] wine-vessel [POETRY] ... I have begun the praise of slaughter’.⁶⁵

While it is tempting to explain these differences in posture by contrasting the ethos of viking society with that of Christianity, by, that is, a shift from pride to humility, I would like to suggest, by way of conclusion, that it was the fact of institutionalization that made much of the difference. Since ‘[c]apital is accumulated labor ... which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor’, it stands to reason that members of an institution that has a dominant share in or monopoly over a kind of capital can more efficiently benefit from such ‘accumulated labor’.⁶⁶ To quote Bourdieu a final time, there is a world of difference between how cultural specialists must operate in,

on the one hand, social universes in which relations of domination are made, unmade, and remade in and by the interactions between persons, and on the other hand, social formations in which, mediated by objective, institutionalized mechanisms, such as those producing and guaranteeing the distribution of ‘titles’ (titles of nobility, deeds of possession, academic degrees, [priestly or monastic offices,] etc.), relations of domination have the opacity and permanence of things Objectification guarantees the permanence and cumulativeness of material and symbolic acquisitions which can then subsist without the agents having to recreate them con-

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁶⁵ Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finnsson, *Háleygjatal* st. 13, ed. R. Poole, and Einarr skálaglamm Helgason, *Vellekla* stt. 5 and 37, ed. Marold, et al., both in *Poetry From the Kings’ Sagas 1*, pp. 212, 289, 329: ‘Jólna sumbl enn vér götum[,] stillis lof; ‘Hljóta munk ... hertýs ... at ausa ... austr vín-Gnóðar’, ‘hefk tekit til mærdar morðs’. For the translation of *Vellekla* st. 5, I have adapted the translation from Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, p. 68. See also the discussion of ‘The poet as craftsman’ in Clunies Ross, *History of Old Norse Poetry*, pp. 84–91.

⁶⁶ Bourdieu, ‘Forms of Capital’, p. 241.

tinuously and in their entirety by deliberate action.⁶⁷

Thus, while court skalds had to prove the worth of themselves and their cultural production, in short to *make a living*, again and again through discrete acts of interpersonal exchange, the devotional skald, as a member of and often office-holder within a culturally-dominant institution, could afford to produce poetry that neither targeted a specific living audience nor sought to effect immediate or direct capital conversion. The devotional skalds thus emblemize the opportunities that agents afforded institutionalized recognition of their cultural capital have for relaxation.

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