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The Function of *Rímur* in Iceland during the Late Middle Ages

SVERRIR TÓMASSON, REYKJAVÍK

1

The Icelandic National Museum possesses a 19th century painting of a group of labourers, men and women, working inside a farmhouse. They are gathered around a man sitting in the centre of the room, the so-called *baðstofa*, the sitting room of the farm. He holds a book under a lamp and is, as far as can be seen, reading aloud while the audience works. The painting is by the 19th century Danish artist A. H. G. Schiøtt (1823-1895). It is said to represent the centuries' old custom, *kvöldvaka*, or the evening gathering: one person reading aloud sagas or poems while other members of the household work during the long dark winter nights, with a snowstorm raging outside. It is quite possible that the painting is true to reality, but one suspects that it exaggerates the practice, gives an overly romanticised impression and leaves the viewer with the notion that the custom was more widespread than it really was. There is evidence of this custom only from the beginning of the 18th century.¹

Although it has not been possible to trace the above-mentioned custom further back in time, we can hardly doubt that oral storytelling or the reciting of poetry was popular in Iceland over the centuries, and that poetry could be either recited or chanted as accompaniment to dancing. Among this poetry were the *rímur* (Sg. *ríma*).

What kind of poetry are *rímur*? In Icelandic literary handbooks they are considered to be a „special Icelandic kind of epic poetry and a special innovation of Icelandic literature of the Late Middle Ages.“² It is not clear what is meant here by ‘epic poetry’ but probably *rímur* have been grouped together with epic because of their similar function, the difference being that *rímur* „were versified retellings of stories already existing in books“.³ This is certainly exaggerated. Many *rímur* tell us stories for which written sources have not been found, whether because they are now lost or simply never existed. We would be doing the *rímur*-poets an injustice if we maintain

¹ Ólafsson, Jón: *Um þá lærðu Vídalína*. In: *Merkir Íslendingar IV*. Ed. Þorkell Jóhannesson. Reykjavík: Bókfellsútgáfan 1950, p. 135; cf. Helgason, Skúli: *Saga Þorlákshafnar til loka áraskipaútgærðar I*. Reykjavík: Örn og Örlygur 1988, p. 79.

² Pétursson, Hannes (ed.): *Bókmenntir*. Reykjavík: Menningarsjóður 1972, p. 81: „[...] sérísl. tegund sögulgjöða og helzta nýjung í ísl. bókm. á miðöld.“; cf. Benediktsson, Jakob (ed.): *Hugtök og heiti í bókmenntafræði*. Reykjavík: Bókmenntafræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands 1983, p. 216.

³ Benediktsson, Jakob: *Hugtök og heiti í bókmenntafræði*, p. 277: „[...] eru yfirleitt aðeins rímuð endursögn sagna sem til voru á bókum.“

that they followed slavishly old matter without elaboration or independent treatment. Icelanders have composed *rímur* from the 14th century to the present. Over 1050 *rímur* exist and only a small number of them have been published.⁴

A single *ríma* is a narrative told in 50-60 or more stanzas in identical metre; commonly a number of these are joined together in a cycle, each of which can be in different metre. This explains why it is customary to speak of them in the plural, i.e. *rímur*. In the oldest *rímur* the use of the metre *ferskeytt* or variants of it is the most common. It runs thus:

Gengu fram fyr kónsins kné
og kvöddu stilli inn teita;
buðu þeir bæði fylgd og fé
frægum sjóla að veita.⁵

[They came into the presence of the cheerful king and greeted him; they offered him, the famous king, their company and money.]

The rhyme is *abab*, but variants can be *aabb* or *aaaa*. Various forms of inner rhyme can also occur in each line. This metre is common in Scandinavian and Icelandic ballads where it often occurs without alliteration. The *ríma* is usually introduced by a prologue, the so-called *mansöngur*, where the poet addresses the audience, usually a lady or ladies – or men if the poet is a woman.

Scholars have pointed out that the *rímur* are so unique in older Icelandic poetic tradition that they must be of foreign origin. The most alien feature is the metre; the diction, however, is in accord with native tradition. Guðbrandur Vigfússon first pointed out that the metre was similar to Latin liturgical metre in the Office of St. Þorlákr. The German scholar Eugen Mogk was of the same opinion and thought that *rímur* had primarily been composed to serve as saints' panegyrics; as evidence he pointed to the *ríma* of St. Óláfr in *Flateyjarbók*. In his pioneering work on Icelandic *rímur* Björn Karel Þórólfsson discussed these views.⁶ He maintained that the origin of *rímur*-metre was to be found among the four-line metre of the ballads in Scandinavia and England. More recent research by William A. Craigie and especially Vésteinn Ólason has shown that the models for *rímur* metre are in fact to be sought in Middle English poetry. The choice of subject matter was also very similar to the Middle English romances and French *chansons de geste*.⁷

⁴ Sigmundsson, Finnur: *Rímnatal* I-II. Reykjavík: Rímnafélagið 1966, p. v.

⁵ *Rímnasafn* I-II. Ed. Finnur Jónsson. København: Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur 1905-1922, I, p. 3. [The spelling and punctuation of all quotations from *Rímnasafn* have been modernised. – Anm. der Red.]

⁶ Þórólfsson, Björn Karel: *Rímur fyrir 1600*. In: *Safn Fræðafjeldagsins um Ísland og Íslendinga* 9. Kaupmannahöfn: Hið íslenska fræðafjeldag 1934, pp. 49-53.

⁷ *Sýnisbók íslenskra rímnna* I. Ed. William A. Craigie. London: Thomas Nelson & Sons 1952, pp. 281-287; Ólason, Vésteinn: *The Traditional Ballads of Iceland*. Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar 1982, pp. 52-67.

Craigie labelled *rímur* as *romances* and Vésteinn Ólason as *metrical romances*. However, if we take a closer look at the subject matter of *rímur* we cannot accept that term for all of them. Admittedly many of them tell of warriors, knights, courtly life, love and sorrows, as is usual in literature of that kind. It should, however, be borne in mind that among the oldest *rímur* the subject matter is also taken from *exempla*, *fabliaux* and legends. The *ríma* of St. Óláfr in the MS *Flateyjarbók* tells us for example about his death as a martyr in the battle at Stiklarstaðir in Norway. It contains some miracles with an invocation to the saint in the last strophe. The opinion of Eugen Mogk cannot therefore be completely disregarded; the four-line stanza, *ferskeytt* is suited to religious poetry. In other words, *rímur* cannot be counted as one genre; they are many, and the only thing they have in common is the diction and metre and in most cases also the manner of performance.

The word *ríma* is a loanword in Icelandic, and as already mentioned occurs for the first time in a heading in *Flateyjarbók* (GKS 1005 fol), but the words *dans*, *vísa*, *spil* and *þáttur* are also used for this kind of poetry. Three of those are adopted from foreign languages. The word *ríma* (rhyme) and *dans* (dance) could indicate that dancing accompanied recital of the poetry, but *rime* is also used for a poem in Middle English.⁸

In his study, *The Traditional Ballads of Iceland*,⁹ Vésteinn Ólason has pointed out two verses from *Sörlarímur* (The *rímur* of Sörli) – which can be dated to the 14th century – where the poet complains of the audience not hearing his poetry because of trampling feet and singing:

Því má eg varla vísu slá
veit eg það til sanns;
þegar að rekkar rímu fá
reyst er hún upp við dans.

[I may barely strike up a verse, for I know for sure that; as soon as the men catch the rhyme, it will be shouted for dancing.]

Gapa þeir upp og gumsa hart
og geyma varla sín,
höldar dansa hralla snart
ef heyrir vísan mín.¹⁰

[They gape in the air and rant with zest, and hardly hold control, the gentlemen dance hard and fast once my verse is heard.]

Critics have, however, considered that most *rímur* are far too long to be suitable for dancing. The Icelandic dance is thought to be similar to the practice of the Faroese

⁸ *Sýnisbók*, p. xv.

⁹ Ólason, Vésteinn: *Traditional Ballads*, p. 40.

¹⁰ *Rímnasafn* II, p. 86.

people up to the present day. Scholars do not, however, agree on this.¹¹ The word *þáttr*, which is also used for ballads on the Faroe islands, suggests a similarity between *rímur* and Faroese ballads. The word *vísa* shows a relationship with the same word used for ballads in Scandinavia. The terms *ríma*, *dans* and *spil* indicate that the text was performed with music, sung, and even used for dancing. There do not exist many sources about dancing or similar conviviality in Medieval Iceland. We know of certain social gatherings, so-called *gleðir*, which consisted of various games (*leikir*, sg. *leikr*), where it is possible that people also wore masks (*grímur*). It is, however, uncertain whether *rímur* were recited on those occasions. In a description of Iceland which Oddur Einarsson, later to become bishop of Skálholt, wrote, most likely at the end of the 16th century, he depicts the leisure time of his countrymen thus:

nunc domesticas historias euolentes ac clara voce ad aliquot horas [...] nunc ueteres rythmos jucunda modulatione cantillantes.¹²

[sometimes they bring out Icelandic sagas (native stories) and read in a clear voice for hours [...] sometimes they recite old poems with an amusing tone.]

Scholars have thought it probable that this kind of chanting has been preserved to this day in the melodies of *rímur* (*rímnalög*) which were collected at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Hallgrímur Helgason, the composer and musicologist, was of the same opinion. In his work on traditional Icelandic music he cited descriptions of German travellers coming to Iceland in the 19th century and referring to a peculiar singing of the natives as „rezitativartig vorgetragen“. He himself named it „söngles“ (recitative) and thought its main value consisted in preserving „the recitative of ancient times in a sad one note style“. ¹³ This description does not fit with the picture given by Oddur Einarsson as „jucunda modulatione cantillantes“. The Icelandic *rímur* ‘tunes’ are often called *stemma*, i.e. voices (cf. German *Stimme*). They are not all chanted (*kveðin*) in the same style. It has been explained that they originate in various parts of the country, where they were performed in a variety of ways according to local custom.

Even though the metre of *rímur* is of foreign origin, their poetic diction is primarily Icelandic. The poetics of *rímur*, however, share some features found in well-known handbooks of medieval rhetoric: one can find similar tags in *rímur* and in Middle English poetry.¹⁴ Scholars have stressed that *rímur* have adopted scaldic

¹¹ See Samsonarson, Jón: *Andmælaræða við doktorsvörn Vésteins Ólasonar* 21.1.1983. In: *Gripla* 6 (1984), pp. 147-148.

¹² [Oddur Einarsson]: *Qualiscunque descriptio Islandiae*. Ed. Fritz Burg. Hamburg: Selbstverlag der Staats- und Universitäts-Bibliothek 1928, p. 66.

¹³ Helgason, Hallgrímur: *Íslenzkar tónmenntir*. Reykjavík: Örn og Örlygur 1980, p. 45: „[...] söngles fornaldar í eintóna, dapurlegum stíl.“

¹⁴ *Sýnisbók*, p. 285; Kristjánsdóttir, Bergljót S.: *‘Gunnlöð ekki gaf mér neitt/af geymsludrykknum forðum...’*. In: *Guðamjöður og arnarleir*. Ed. Sverrir Tómasson. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan 1996, pp. 195-196.

techniques, like the so-called *heiti* (rare words used for the most common things) or *kenning* (two words or more used to refer to one term or a word). This technique is taken for the most part from Snorri's *Edda*, a handbook of poetics, written in Icelandic at the beginning of the 13th century and in continuous use into the 19th century.

It has been maintained that Snorri's *Edda* accounts for the poetic diction in *rímur*, but a closer investigation disproves this claim. The audience, accustomed to one kind of *kenning* could easily form another one of the same type by taking the base-word out of the *kenning* and putting another one in its place; thus gaining either a change in meaning or a variation of the same meaning. In Snorri's *Edda* there are lists of base-words for forming a *kenning*; these include those for a man, a woman, a soldier, gold, swords or other weapons, battles and poetry. We could therefore presume that already at the beginning of the *rímur*-period in the 14th century, a listener could easily understand such *kennings* and create new ones in the same style; they simply became formulas and preserved the oral function of *rímur*.

2

Medieval Icelandic *rímur*, those that were definitely composed before 1600, are mostly preserved in six vellum MSS. The oldest of them is *Kollsbók*, Wolfenbüttel 42 4to. It was written in the last decades of the 15th century and bears the name of its owner, Jón kollur Oddsson, who lived at Holt (Stórholt) in Saurbær in Dalasýsla, at the end of Breiðafjörður. He was probably born about 1450 and died shortly after 1520.¹⁵ Jón kollur was very likely of noble descent; his wife was the daughter of Guðni Jónsson and sister of Björn Guðnason in Ögur in Ísafjarðarsýsla in the Western fjords, one of the most powerful and wealthy noblemen in the latter part of the 15th century.

The most important vellum MS containing *rímur* is the so-called *Staðarhólsbók*, AM 604 4to. Árni Magnússon, the famous manuscript collector, attained it from Pétur Bjarnason in 1707. Pétur lived in Tjaldanes and later at Staðarhóll in Saurbær in Dalasýsla. His grandfather was Páll Jónsson, one of the most active aristocrats during the latter part of the 16th century. He lived at Staðarhóll and at Reykhólar. Staðarhóll in Saurbær is not far from Holt. It is, however, uncertain whether *Staðarhólsbók* was kept in Staðarhóll from the time it was written until it came into the hands of Árni Magnússon. The scribes of the MS are well known for their workmanship, a father and son, Ari Jónsson and Tómas Arason, who in all likelihood wrote it c. 1540, probably in Súgandafjörður, in the Western fjords.

The third main vellum codex of *rímur* also originated in Dalasýsla: *Hólsbók*, AM 603 4to. Árni Magnússon received this MS from Magnús Jónsson. His family had

¹⁵ Halldórsson, Ólafur (ed.): *Kollsbók*. Íslensk handrit V. Reykjavík: Handritastofnun Íslands 1968, p. xlv.

lived at Hóll in Hörðudalur, not very far from Holt and Staðarhóll in Saurbær. This MS is reckoned to be written in the latter part of the 16th century. The fourth vellum MS of *rímur* is *Selskinna*, AM 605 4to, written late in the 16th century. It was in the possession of Magnús Björnsson, a wealthy landowner in the 17th century whose grandfather was Páll Jónsson at Staðarhóll. The fifth codex is Stock perg. 4to nr. 23, a 16th century MS, which was once in the hands of Gunnlaugur Oddsson from Hvítadalur in Saurbær in Dalasýsla. The sixth vellum MS is the so-called *Krossnesbók*, Stock perg. 4to nr. 22, a 16th century codex. It came originally from Krossnes in Strandasýsla, the next county north of Dalasýsla.

Of greatest interest is the fact that all the codices are almost written in the same century and they have remained for many decades in the same area, the north-western part of Iceland; this cannot be a coincidence. In the period in question, the late Middle Ages and the 16th century, these counties were the wealthiest with regard to both farming and fishing; the best fishing banks were just off the coast of the Western fjords and Breiðafjörður. People from all over the country flocked to this area. Foreign fishermen, mainly Englishmen in the 14th and 15th centuries and later Germans, frequented those fjords, and some of them stayed there more than nine months of each year, maintaining their own shore-based stations. It is certain that the aristocrats in those parts of Iceland sold the foreigners both farm products and fish in return for all sorts of chattel not obtainable in the country. There are no records of other types of exchange between those nations and Iceland, but it is highly probable that the visitors brought along not only pewter and similar merchandise but also foreign customs and even books. There is evidence of Middle English texts being translated into Icelandic but it is not known for whom the translations were made. After the Reformation in 1550 German cultural influence gradually became stronger.

It is a well-known fact that during the 15th century some noble families became richer and much more powerful than in the centuries before. It is obvious that only the very rich could afford vellum codices, and the question arises whether they were meant for reading in private or whether they were meant for some other use. I will here mainly look at *Staðarhólsbók* and try to ascertain whether its role was something other than just preserving the text.

The MS now contains 33 *rímur*; some leaves are lost, so it is possible that it originally had more than 33. Björn Karel Þórólfsson thought that some of the *rímur* were very old, while others had just been composed when they were written down about 1540. It is hardly possible to see any principle of organisation in the codex that could indicate for whom they were primarily intended. The book starts with the *rímur* of Filipó which are actually called *Krítar þáttr* (The tale of Crete) at the end. They tell of the knight Filipó and his adventures and how in the end he attained both a bride and a country. The *rímur* begin with a very short *mansöngur* (two verses) addressed to the audience, called *þjóð*, which here means the men and women at a particular place.

The message of the poet is reduced to four lines:

Söguna ætla eg seggjum tjá
setjist menn niðr og hlýði,
hversu að elskan margföld má
mektug sigrá lýði.¹⁶

[I am going to tell the story; people should sit down and listen how manifold and powerful love can conquer nations.]

It is worthy of note that the poet merely intended to tell a story and that he wanted men and women to sit down and listen. In the last strophe of the *rímur*, the poet wishes that his poem and praise of Filipó's wife should come into the possession of other women:

Færð er mærd um falda gátt,
fljóðin eignist kvæði.
Kalli allir Krítar þátt
kappar þetta fræði.¹⁷

[The praise of the lady is brought forward; the ladies should possess the poem. All the warriors should call this lore Krítar þátr.]

This is of course a common *topos* in *rímur*.

The following *rímur* in *Staðarhólsbók* are about both Scandinavian and German heroes: the *rímur* of *Án bogsveigir*, *Hemingr Ásláksson*, *Konráð Keisarason*, *Herburt*, *Reinald* and *Andri*. Most of these warriors are known from heroic tales in prose. This succession of warriors is, however, interrupted by an *exemplum*, the *rímur* of *Landrés*, which deal with the same material as *Ólífar þátr* in the B-version of *Karlamagnúss saga*. After the *rímur* of *Landrés* come 12 sets of *rímur* about Scandinavian heroes like *Hjálmþér*, *Friðþjófr*, *Haraldr* and *Hálfðan brönufóstri* along with well-known knights like *Bæring* and *Dínus*. At the end of this series comes the exemplary story of the three rogues: *Bad*, *Worse*, *Worst*, which is a well-known tale from exempla collections. It is possible that those two exempla were put among the romances on purpose, to serve as edification after a series of light amusements. Following the last *exemplum* are *rímur* which retell Old Norse mythic topics. First are the *Sörlarímur*, composed after the famous *tale of Sörli* in *Flateyjarbók*; then come three *rímur* which

¹⁶ *Riddara-rímur*. Ed. Theodor Wisén. København: Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur 1881, p. 3. [The spelling and punctuation have been modernised in all quotations from *Riddara-rímur*. – Anm. d. Red.]

¹⁷ *Riddara-rímur*, p. 61.

deal with the same subject matter as the eddic poems and Snorri's *Edda*. These are *Lokrur*, *Þrymlur* and *Völsunga rímur*. There is no other Old Norse literature of this kind. All the verses of *Lokrur* and *Völsunga rímur* are completely preserved here but some verses at the beginning of *Þrymlur* are lacking, due to a defect in the MS; probably one leaf of the quire is lost.

It is obvious that *Þrymlur*, as they are preserved in *Staðarhólsbók*, have been written down directly from oral performance or the scribe's memory: errors that occur in the text are due to incorrect hearing or memory failure. *Þrymlur* are divided into three fits, two of which are in *ferskeytt* metre, one in so-called *braghent*. This meter consists of three lines, the rhyme being *aaa*. The first line has twelve syllables and three alliterating words; the second and third have eight syllables each. In all there are 85 verses. It must have been easy to learn them by heart. We know of instances where people have memorized much longer poems.¹⁸

Scholars have considered that *Þrymlur* was based on the famous eddic lay, *Þrymskviða*, and also some of Snorri Sturluson's narratives in his *Edda*. Björn Karel Þórólfsson, for example, maintained that the poet used the MSS *Codex Regius* and *Codex Wormianus* of *Snorra Edda*. It does not, however, matter which MS the poet knew, if he knew any, because he has re-shaped the material from a new point of view, even though the kernel is the same as in *Þrymskviða*: how Þór regained his hammer *Mjöllnir* from the giant *Þrymur*.

As well known, *Þrymskviða* starts *in medias res*: no explanation is given as to how the giant *Þrymur* got hold of the hammer *Mjöllnir*. It is only stated that Þór woke up bursting with anger (*vreiðr*) and discovered that his hammer was missing. Loki put on Freyja's feathered cloak and went to look for the hammer. He found the giant who told him that Þór would not get his hammer back to Ásgarður (home of the gods) unless Freyja were to become his bride. Þór was then dressed in a bridal veil and went with Loki to the hall of the giants. In *Þrymlur* an explanation is given for the stealing of the hammer:

Heimboð veitti halrinn stór
hölda sveit með sigri;
sá hét Þrymr er þangað fór,
þursa gramrinn digri.

[After the victory the noble man invited the men to his house; a person called *Þrymur*, the stout giant went there.]

Brögðin taka að birtast stór
er bragnar vóru í svefni
hamarinn *Mjöllnir* hvarf frá Þór;

¹⁸ Helgason, Jón: *Noter til Þrymlur*. In: *Bibliotheca Arnarnagana* XXXI. Opuscula V. København: Munksgaard 1975, pp. 241-249.

hér eru brögð í efni.¹⁹

[The great tricks started when the men were asleep; the hammer Mjöllnir disappeared – there is some trickery going on.]

The eddic lay, in contrast to *Þrymlur* neither describes the gods' appearance nor their roles in the godly world. The introduction of the gods is very short, and rhetorical devices of portraiture, which are often found in *rímur*, are lacking. As an example let us look at the description of Þór in *Þrymlur*:

Gjarðir á hann sem greint var mér,
gripirnir finnast fleiri;
flegar hann spennir fleim að sér
flá er hann trollum meiri.

[He has, as I was told, a girdle of might, and some other things are among his possessions. When he buckles it on he is mightier than giants are].

Undra digr er örva fiundr,
ekki blíðr í máli,
glófa átti Grímnis kundr,
gjörðir vóru af stáli.

[The god (soldier) is extremely powerful and does not speak smoothly. He, the son of Óðinn, has gloves made of steel].

Glófar vinna görpum mein,
greiptir hauka foldu,
hrífr hann me> fleim harðan stein
sem hendr væri í foldu.²⁰

[The hands in the gloves can split a hard stone just as if the hands were in soil].

Even though physical descriptions are scant in *Þrymlur*, Þór in his bride's veil is very well focussed:

Ýtar *bjuggu Ása-Þór sem eg vil greina,
settu á bringu breiða steina,
blóðrætt gull og pellið hreina.

[The gods furnished Þór as I will now tell: put broad boulders on his breast and (covered with) blood-red gold and glittering silk.]

¹⁹ *Rímnasafn* I, p. 280.

²⁰ *Rímnasafn* I, p. 279.

Brúsi sagði brögðin ljót á bauga eyju:

„Því eru öndótt augu Freyju?

Ekki líst oss bragð á meyju“.²¹

[The (giant) Brúsi said the virgin's countenance ugly: 'Why are Freyja's eyes so fierce? We do not like the virgin's look'.]

The events in *Þrymlur* take place in the home of the gods, Ásgarður, and in Jötunheimur, Gianthome. Neither dwelling is described, but from the *rímur* it can be seen that the persons have to travel between those locations. When Loki and Þór leave Ásgarður,

Goðunum fylgja geysimargar geitr og kálfar,

telst þá ekki troll og álfar,

töframenn og vödur sjálfar.

[The gods are followed by numerous goats and calves; we do not count elves and trolls, magicians and sibyls.]

Fuglar margir fylgja þeim fleina rjóðum

villidýr af veiðislóðum

varga sveit með úlfum óðum.²²

[The gods are followed by many birds and beasts from hunting grounds, pack of wolfs with raving animals.]

It is not obvious why such a huge and beautiful band of animals and beasts accompanies the gods, but it is remarkable that goats are among them. This reminds us of the descriptions in the German Schembart books.²³

At the home of the giants some of bridegroom's guests are mentioned. The list consists only of names:

Þar var Surtr, Haki og Hrymr,

höfðinginn var jötna Þrymr,

Sörkvir, Móði, Geitir og Glámr,

Grímnir, Brúsi, Dofri og Ámr.

[There was Surtr, Haki and Hrymr; the chief of giants was Þrymr; (there were) Sörkvir, Móði, Geitir and Glámr, Grímnir, Brúsi, Dofri and Ámr.]

²¹ *Rímnasafn* I, pp. 283-284; *bjuggu, byggju MS.

²² *Rímnasafn* I, p. 283.

²³ Kinser, Samuel: *Why Is Carnival So Wild?* In: *Carnival and Carnavalesque*. Eds. Konrad Eisenbichler and Wim Hüskens. Atlanta, Amsterdam: Rodopi 1999, pp. 62-66.

And:

Eigi var þeirra flokkurinn fríðr;
Fála kom þar inn og Gríðr,
Hlökk og Syrpa, Gjálp og Greip;
geysilegt var þeirra sveip.²⁴

[The assembly was not attractive; Fála came there and Gríðr, Hlökk and Syrpa, Gjálp and Greip; their movements were rather noisy.]

When we look more closely at the giants' names we can see that they are closely connected with their looks and behaviour: *Haki* bears this name because he has a big chin; *Hrymur* means he who is drying up, getting old; *Glámur* means he who is pale or ghostly; *Syrpa* means a slob, cf. Icelandic *sorþ*, rubbish; *Greip*, she who has very big hands.

In the *rímur* representatives of two worlds are at odds; however, a moral judgement is not made on either group, as often happens in the eddic myths. In the end, the gods conquered the giants. The story is meant to provide amusement, to let the audience enjoy the frolic. The wedding at Gianthome has e.g. very distinctive Rabelaisian features:

Komu á borðið bryttrog stór,
brúðir sátu upp hjá Þór;
jaxlar veittu jötnum lið,
enginn hafði hnífinn við.

[Upon the table came a very big trough of meat. The ladies sat next to Þór; the molars assisted the giants, nobody used a knife].

Börðust þeir með býsnum svá
blóðið dreif um alla þá;
knútum var þar kastað oft
komu stundum hnefar á loft.

[They fought with fervour, the blood spread all over them; bones were thrown and sometimes fists were raised.]

Uxa frá eg at æti brúðr,
ekki var þeirra leikrinn prúðr;
lagði hun at sér laxa tólf
og lét þó aldri bein á gólf.²⁵

[I have been told that the bride ate an ox; their game was not polite; she swallowed twelve salmons and never put a bone on the floor.]

²⁴ *Rímnasafn* I, p. 285.

²⁵ *Rímnasafn* I, pp. 285-286.

This description can be compared with the relatively modest one in the eddic *Þrymskviða*.

In the *rímur*, however, *Þrymskviða*'s famous ironic ambiguity of Loki and Þór riding to Gianthome as a man and woman is lost, and the *rímur* treat the gender roles differently; in this journey both males are dressed as women. The poet does, however, forget this fact at one point when Loki is spoken of as a man:

Fastað hefr hun fjórtán nætr
Freyja sjálf og halrinn mætr;
drósin hvorki drakk né át
drjúgmjög er hun nú orðin kát.²⁶

[She, Freyja herself, has fasted for a fortnight and so has (her fellow traveller) the good man also done; the woman (the bride) did neither drink nor eat, she is now very cheerful.]

At the end of the *rímur* stands this verse:

Þrymlur heiti þetta spil;
þann veg gekk um hamarinn til.
Eignist sá sem óðar biðr,
ekki skal þeim kasta niðr.²⁷

[This *spil* (i.e. game, play, poetry) of what happened to the hammer (Mjöllnir) shall be called Þrymlur; he who asks for this poem, will get it; it shall not be thrown away.]

I think that the poet deliberately chose the word *spil* to describe his work; it must refer not only to the poem itself but rather to the performance of it, a recital or games, accompanied with musical instruments, songs, or perhaps some sort of acting. In this connection we should recall how the German word *spill* is used in names of carnival plays of the 15th and 16th centuries ('*das fasnact spill Troya*' 1463). Working against this notion is the fact that a proper dialogue can hardly be heard in *Þrymlur*, only occasional questions and answers.

²⁶ *Rímnasafn* I, p. 286.

²⁷ *Rímnasafn* I, p. 288.

3

It is obvious that the MS of *Brymlur*, *Staðarhólsbók* was written for wealthy people, aristocrats. It occurred to Jón Helgason that it was originally written for Eggert Hannesson (d. 1560) who lived at Bær in Rauðisandur on the northern side of Breiðafjörður. Eggert Hannesson was in close contact with German merchants but had experienced some severe problems with the English fishermen. As already stated the MS was written in the Western fjords and far from Bær. Eggert Hannesson's son-in-law was Magnús Jónsson, a *rímur*-poet and the brother of Páll Jónsson, the grandfather of Pétur Bjarnason who sent the MS to Árni Magnússon in 1707. We do not know how long the MS was in that family's possession. It is, however, worthwhile to try to find out how these aristocrats lived. One may ask whether their dwellings were spacious enough to have plays acted and games performed. From written sources one can conclude that their farms were so enormous that they seem to have had beds for more than 40 people. And some of those aristocrats even had two or three such farms in the Western fjords: In summary, there was no shortage of spacious houses or people to perform all sorts of games.

In the book *Qualiscunque*, from which I have quoted above, is a description of the amusements of the Icelanders and their hospitality. It runs thus in my translation:

Sometimes they play cards, cast dice [...] sometimes they gather for popular dancing similar to what is said to be the practice of the people who live in the country of America. Firstly, somebody who has learned the art of poetry and is thought to have a better voice than the others is chosen among the workers or other people present. As an introduction he chants for some time with a trembling and slightly hesitating voice something which has little or no meaning because little can be heard: ha, ha, ha, ho, ho, ho, he, he, he, hu, he, ho, ha etc.; these syllables are sometimes repeated in the course of the poem. In order to meet the audience's approval, two other singers are told to stand at the sides of the main singer and recite in a slightly lower bass-like voice. These voices do not form a bad harmony and sound rather good. While those three men complete the introduction and think of some poems to go with it, the people walk hand in hand and form a circle, or they go off in couples to a place where they remain for the duration of the dance. They then dance without singing, keeping tune with the music and adjusting their tempo as the singers become louder; thus they become tired in a short time. After this some individuals start singing more decent poems and dance to the rhythm; they do not keep moving steadily but go slowly and constantly around until everybody has completed their poems [...] It should be noted, however, that dances like those were more common in previous times than today, and they were not only done to gladden the visitors but to amuse the inhabitants of the island. And the people were so eager to play that at certain times of the year a great number of men and women flocked to certain places at saints' holy festivals or vigils, as they are more commonly named, and there they frolic

icked all night long like Bacchanalians, so to speak, dancing and performing other amusing games and engaging in carnival activities.²⁸

When this was written, the Lutheran reformation had already been underway in the country for almost four decades. The first Lutheran bishops were opposed to saints' festivals or *vigiliae*, and Lent did not play the same role as it had done in Catholic times. I have elsewhere argued that *Skíðaríma*, which has only come down to us in 18th century MSS, was originally a carnival play. Other similar plays must have existed. And if we take a closer look at *Brymlur*, we can easily see that many things fit very well with Oddur Einarsson's description. The introduction of *Brymlur* is in epic style and therefore one singer could very well have chanted it, but when the questions and answers of the dialogue begin, it is not unthinkable that more singers were added; an activity like this was called *spil*. This performance might have been followed by a feast, a mock wedding between two males, with a pack of masked animals entering the scene before a meal took place – in other words, a carnival. Such amusement was suitable for fishermen's huts or in schools where only men lived. On the other hand, the *Brymlur* sound very much like a description of a carnival, not the act itself, a description of something which had happened long time ago but was no longer practised at the time when the *rímur* were written down.

I shall now draw my conclusions. The function of *rímur* was a social one: they were played, acted or performed with dancing and music on special occasions, like saints' vigils. They were also read aloud for pleasure, both for people at work and in private, for which the vellum codices represent evidence. *Rímur* are not one genre, although they have been treated this way by scholars; they are many genres in verses

²⁸ *Qualiscunque*, pp. 66-67: „[...] nunc etiam chartas lusorias aut alueum sextesserarium [...] exercentes, alias etiam uulgares choreas et saltationes tales fere, quales dicuntur esse illorum hominum, qui in terra America habitant. Primo enim ex famulis aut aliis præsentibus unus aliquis eligitur, qui istam cantillandi artem probe didicerat cæterisque uidetur uocalior. Hic initio, quasi procemii cujusdam uice, tremula ac titubante quodammodo uoce aliquantis per quædam modulatur aut parum aut nihil significantia. Ibi enim solæ fere exaudiuntur hæ particulæ ha ha ha, ho ho ho, he he, hu he, ho ha he etc., quæ etiam postea in ipsa cantiuncula subinde repetuntur. Ut autem gravior fiat auditoribus ista harmonia, adhibentur duo succentores, qui ad latera præsidis collocati aliquantulum pressiore ac stabiliore utuntur uoce uergente quasi ad bassum musicum. Unde symphonia non absurda et concentus non insuauis efficitur. Ac, dum isti tres hoc modo in procemio simul occupantur et aliquam significantem cantionem huic mox subjiciendam excogitant, reliqui apprehensis mutuo manibus in orbem se disponunt aut bini et bini certam sibi stationem eligunt, quam sint seruaturi, donec illa tripudia durauerint. Postea magna alacritate taciti ad numerum saltitant et, quo majore uocis contentione utuntur cantores, perstrepunt, ut facile breui temporis spatio defatigentur. Finito ergo isto actu ordiuntur singuli alternatim modestiores quasdam cantiunculas ad istum quoque numerum leniter saltantes, non tamen amplius iisdem inhærentes uestigiis, sed continue in gyrum decenter circumeuntes, donec omnes suas cantiones absoluerint. [...] Sciendum autem hic est, quod istæ choreæ et saltationes apud nos olim fuerint multo frequentissimæ nec tantum in exhilarandis hospitibus usurpatæ, sed sæpiusculæ animi causa a domesticis iteratæ, adeoque ad eas fuerunt insulani, ut certis anni temporibus ad peculiaria quædam loca in uigilijs sanctorum, ut uulgo appellant, conflueret magna utriusque sexus hominum multitudo in qualibet prouincia totis noctibus ita tripudiando et alternatim alias ludicras actiones et ridicula spectacula exhibendo quasi bacchantium more insaniens.“

just like popular poems, *Volkslieder*. *Rímur* contain *romances*, *exempla*, *fabliaux* and remains of plays that were performed with music and sometimes dance. This performance was called *spil*. Later, especially in the latter part of the 16th century when Bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson tried to revive Christian morality in the light of Lutheran doctrine, he wanted to give *rímur* a new edifying role. Poets were instructed to compose *rímur* about suitable Biblical subject matters. That, however, is another story.

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