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Abstract & Keywords

Preliminary remarks

Medieval Old Norse-Icelandic literature is characterized by an extraordinary variety of vernacular forms. In comparison to continental vernacular literature, it reflects at a very early stage on its own language and the associated possibilities for narration in the vernacular. This occurs on many levels, in both poetry (skaldic and eddic poetry of gods and heroes) and prose (sagas and non-fiction texts such as grammatical treatises). Here traditionally oral forms of literature are adapted to new written models of narration and language comprehension. As soon as it begins to appear in the 11th century, the medium of writing is used with active and self-reflexive interest. Fundamental questions are addressed: how does one write in the vernacular? What can narration achieve? How can written poetry and narrative be legitimized? It might be assumed that such questions would mainly be discussed in scholarly literature. Yet the possibilities and limitations of language are also always evoked, implicitly and explicitly, in eddic and skaldic poetry and in saga literature. The Old Icelandic interest in language is especially apparent in what is known as the *Prose Edda* (*P-E*), the most important medieval Scandinavian text on linguistic and literary theory. This highly complex and multi-layered work interweaves a traditional description of the pagan world of the gods, a Christian study of style and prosody, and other content, to create a comprehensive linguistic experiment.

For several centuries, the *P-E* has been an important document at the centre of the study of Old Norse-Icelandic literature. In terms of research history, since the 19th century the *P-E* has mainly been the object of a philological interest in antiquarian questions. The primary focus has been on the sources of the work and, linked with this, Norse mythology. Beginning in the 1980s, a new research interest developed alongside this, informed by linguistic and literary theory, and focusing on skaldic poetry, a special genre of Old Norse-Icelandic literature. These two areas of research have usually been considered separately, because they are seen as only loosely connected. The present study adopts a different approach: the starting point is an attempt to take the work seriously as a form of cultural meaning-making, in its diversity and therefore ambiguity, and so to read the different content and forms in conjunction with each other.

Aim of this study

This study reads the *P-E* from a perspective that seeks to combine the separate areas of research described above. The aim is a holistic reading, linking the two aspects of the *P-E* – the thematic aspect and that concerned with linguistic theory – and connecting the academic level of linguistic theory with a (narratological) perspective based on literary scholarship. This approach is not only intended to reveal poetological techniques and make visible the advanced media knowledge of the *P-E*; it also encompasses the question of how the texts have been handed down and compiled, thus offering a glimpse of the media dynamics of 13th-century Icelandic literature.

The foundation for the study is the observation that the *P-E* reflects in various ways on language, literature and narration as specific kinds of communication. It does this by playing with traditional narrative forms (e.g. with eddic poetry, genealogical narratives etc.), thus exploring the limitations and possibilities of a new way of telling stories. The different texts make use of the opportunity to mediate and impose order on the world through language and narration, and to call into question their own mediation. The *P-E* is very much aware of its literary constructedness, and thematizes this on many levels. Thus, for example it is not only the parts of the text referred to as “pragmatic” (such as the study on verse-forms, the *Háttatal*, and parts of the treatise on poetry, *Skáldskaparmál*) which revolve around literature, explaining how it works. The parts concerned with literary theory are also closely related to those parts of the texts which at first glance have little connection to a poetics. In actual fact, however, the latter texts also show a great interest in questions of language theory: the prologue, *Gylfaginning*, and *Skáldskaparmál* are all concerned with literature, narration, and their potential to create meaning in the world. They should therefore be included in a reading focused on questions of linguistic theory.

Such a reading should also take into account texts that have not hitherto been understood under the “title” *Prose Edda*: the various texts annexed to the canonical *Edda* text in the different manuscripts that have been handed down. This means that the *P-E* can suddenly also incorporate a grammatical treatise or various genealogical lists. Furthermore, a reading must integrate the different media phenomena: in addition to the text, there are illustrations and diagrammatic forms, and the distinctive features of the layout must also be noted. If the content, forms and specificities of a manuscript are read in context, this allows new insights both for the individual texts and for the work as a whole.

Corpus

Codex Upsaliensis DG 11 4to (U) is at the centre of this study. This version of the *Edda* was not chosen because it is the oldest extant manuscript, but because of the numerous media phenomena which make this manuscript so unique. Conceived as a compilation, the different parts make up the Codex Upsaliensis. The manuscript is dated to around 1300, and contains several parts which do not correspond to the canonical picture of the *P-E* conveyed by the modern editions and translations. The canonical text appears alongside genealogical lists, grammatical diagrams, and pictures. These components are all forms of organizing knowledge which have not yet been sufficiently integrated into readings of the *Prose Edda*. In comparison to the complex media phenomena in U, the Codex Wormianus (W) and Codex Regius (R) do not offer such varying manifestations of book culture. W does present the four *Grammatical Treatises* together, which seems relevant for a language-centred reading of the *Edda*, but it omits the diagrams from the *Second Grammatical Treatise*, and thus the specific media configuration of the text. It is important to include such features in a purely text-based reading, especially when the plan behind them is as clearly discernible as it is in U.

Theoretical approach

To systematize the reading, the *P-E* is studied in the light of a theoretical approach which has been tested and discussed extensively in a wide range of disciplines in recent years.

This is the discourse of performativity or the performative, which is not yet widely known in Old Norse studies. This discourse is concerned, in various ways, with the potential of language and linguistic acts to influence reality. This is where it intersects with the *P-E*, making a reading of the medieval work based on certain premises of the current discourse worthwhile. Considerations from German medieval studies are particularly influential for this study. Cornelia Herberich's and Christian Kiening's transposition of the discourse of performativity to a specifically literary performativity offers great potential for Old Norse studies.

In order to be able to systematize the readings of the various elements of the Codex Upsaliensis, concepts from the discourse of literary performativity have been used as analytical tools. Using the three concepts of "saying as doing", "repetition/repeatability", and "framing", the components of U have been read in the order in which they appear in U. Restricting the focus to the three aspects of literary performativity has made it possible to encompass the very diverse contents and forms of the work in a joint reading. It is a conceptual inventory which is applicable across media boundaries.

Structure of the study

The opening chapter is followed by an introduction to the theoretical perspective from which the readings of the *P-E* will be undertaken (Chapter 2, "Literary performativity"). The concept of literary performativity which is central here is explored by means of an overview of the performative and the rhizomatic forms it takes in a wide range of disciplines. This is followed by two substantive chapters, examining in depth selected passages from the *P-E*. The first of these two chapters deals with the narrative sections of the work, which explore the potential of various narratives to create meaning (Chapter 3, "Understanding the world – writing the world: performative narration"). These sections thematize reflection on the writer's own work on the myth, as well as the appropriate use of media to convey genealogical knowledge. The second reading-focused chapter deals with the various aspects of language theory within the linguistic sections of the *P-E* (Chapter 4, "Writing the world – understanding the world: performative erudition"). Unlike the narrative sections, these texts are not concerned with capturing the "world" in language, but with understanding language as the basis of any linguistic organization of the world in all its facets. Each of these chapters ends with a short summary. The final chapter (Chapter 5) sums up all the observations and draws a conclusion. This chapter also discusses the difficulties that have arisen during the study, and points to possible further questions.

Findings

The aim of this study was to subject the *P-E* to a holistic and systematic reading. The idea was to read the work as a form of cultural meaning-making in all its diversity and/or ambiguity, in order to gain a new perspective on the most important work of linguistic and literary theory in the Scandinavian Middle Ages. The main initial thesis here was that the *P-E* is not only a textbook on skaldic poetry, but has a broad interest in language, narration and poetry, informed by linguistic and media theory. The different readings have confirmed this thesis for the version of the *P-E* in Codex Upsaliensis: this manuscript from 1300 contains didactic methods and contents, as well as discursive elements revealing reflection on

the knowledge to be transmitted. Often the two areas intersect, which also becomes noticeable in the underlying encyclopaedic tendency of *U*: the aim is to comprehend and classify the world in all its components, as far as possible, and this requires names or definitions for the phenomena under discussion. But *U* not only compiles and systematizes the different elements of content; it also juxtaposes various kinds of transmission via media: prose texts, with and without verse quotations, representations in the form of lists and diagrams, and figurative illustrations constitute a kind of collection of literary genres.

Codex Upsaliensis includes unusual and unique permutations of texts and subject matters, and does not seem averse to media experiments. This trying out of new ways of dealing with language draws attention to another dimension of the *P-E*: the philosophy of language. Viewed as a whole, *U* presents a reflection on the best way to bring together new and old forms of cultural meaning-making and adapt them to the requirements of the present – without losing sight of one's own past. It is precisely the innovative media treatment in *U* which makes it clear that this is not necessarily about wanting to archive the indigenous cultural past, but rather about attempting to relate old and new forms to one another in productive ways. The *P-E* also demonstrates, however, that these updated forms are new bodies of knowledge, which therefore require legitimation. At several points in *U*, the question implicitly asked is how a written text can produce something that it is not yet itself, or how a text can bestow meaning on itself.

The study has shown that the *P-E* in *U* is a complex structure, which must be understood as a holistic and thoroughly planned work. *U* is not a compilation of materials which are merely connected via a common theme, that of skaldic poetry. If our reading takes into account all the texts contained in *U*, a striking number of deliberate intratextual and intertextual connections emerge. Codex Upsaliensis aims to give a comprehensive treatment of the possibilities and limitations of the Old Icelandic language.

The readings have led to interesting new starting points for further study of the *Prose Edda*, which can certainly be productively extended in some areas. One aim of the study was to expand the understanding of the *P-E* to include not only the four canonical sections (Prologue, *Gylfaginning*, *Skáldskaparmál* and *Háttatal*), but also what is contained in the extant manuscripts. This aim has been fulfilled for the reading of Codex Upsaliensis. Such an approach would also be desirable for the other *Edda* manuscripts, RTW – as well as a subsequent comparative examination of all the versions. Each individual version of the *Prose Edda* could then be described as an autonomous record in the remarkable discourse on linguistic theory which took place in medieval Iceland. As this discourse is also very much present in other Old Norse-Icelandic literary genres, it could be worthwhile extending the performative perspective proposed here to the reading of such works.

Keywords

Prose Edda, Gylfaginning, Second Grammatical Treatise, Codex Upsaliensis, Old Norse Literature, Skaldic poetry, Language Theory, Performativity, Mediality.