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# Dissonant Voices in the Prosimetrum of *Heiðarvígá saga*

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In considering the aesthetics of *Íslendingasaga* prosimetrum, a key concern for saga scholars is the degree to which verse is integrated harmoniously into the framing narrative of the prose.<sup>1</sup> For some, the ways in which verse quotation can contribute to the perceived ‘unity’ of a text take precedence in their analysis. A representative example is Paul Bibire’s (1973) analysis of *Eyrbyggja saga*, in which Bibire argues that the use of verse in the saga contributes to its narrative in a sustained, unifying sense, “either by ‘pointing’ or otherwise corroborating structures or effects already present in the text, or in creating new structures or additional literary effects, harmonising with those in the text”.<sup>2</sup> Yet the use of poetry elsewhere in the *Íslendingasögur* suggests that harmonisation is by no means standard across the corpus, where many stanzas show some degree of discordance with their prose framings. Indeed, it may be expected that the juxtaposition of distinct literary forms, each of which displays a strong narrating impulse (see Würth 2007: 265), would often result in divergent, even contradictory accounts being set alongside each other. Judy Quinn (1997: 61) also notes that the specific configuration of poetic and prose sources in saga literature, in which verses by known authors are quoted within an anonymously authored prose framework, has the potential to disrupt the text on the level of narrative discourse, in the sense that “the [prose] narrator’s voice is at once in competition with another voice, which through its poetic form is graced with significance and authority”.

Perhaps the most in-depth investigation of a saga known for having discordant prosimetrum is Heather O’Donoghue’s (1991) analysis of *Kormáks saga*, a text long criticised for perceived compositional flaws, including the incorporation of poetry into its prose (on this topic, see Poole 1997: 45–46). O’Donoghue (1991: viii) argues conversely that discrepancies between the verse and prose in the saga are not always indicative of a

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2 Bibire’s model of a unifying textual structure in *Eyrbyggja saga*’s prosimetrum has been challenged by Heather O’Donoghue (2005: 78–134), who argues that the saga’s dialogue verses provide a counterpoint to its interest in political or communal matters by focusing on the personal and emotional experiences of the speakers.

lack of skill on the part of its author(s), as scholars tend to suggest, but more likely point to compromises made in the pursuit of certain aesthetic qualities:

Discrepancy arises not only as a result of the saga author's constructional failings, but also in consequence of his positive artistic treatment of the material. [...] In *Kormaks saga*, where there is discrepancy, one can often see a pleasing justness or aptness in the placing of a verse, and it is clear that the saga author has valued the aesthetic, dramatic effect to be had from the speaking of a verse in the narrative over factual consistency.

In shifting attention to what discordant instances of verse quotation may achieve in an aesthetic sense, O'Donoghue engages productively with the variety of ways in which prosimetrum is deployed within *Kormáks saga* without the need to ascribe textual discrepancies to failure on the part of its author(s). This approach lays the groundwork for a reassessment of other sagas whose integration of verse and prose has been criticised along similar lines. While modern literary critics may value more highly the sagas seen as displaying higher levels of unity or harmony in their configuration of source material, such concerns may be more reflective of modern than medieval literary expectations and, accordingly, may not have been prioritised by saga writers or audiences.

It is worth considering, however, whether O'Donoghue's approach may be taken one step farther by exploring whether discordance in saga prosimetrum may be understood not only as the incidental outcome of a decision to prioritise aesthetic effect over factual consistency, but as an artful choice to encode dissonant voices within a text *in order to achieve* a particular aesthetic, at least in some cases. If some saga writers were content to let poetic and prose voices clash with each other in favour of prioritising their aesthetic goals, would other writers have looked to take advantage of prosimetrum's capacity for narrative disruption to create distinctive literary effects? Indeed, the idea that disruptive configurations of distinct literary forms may have actively contributed to the aesthetic qualities of certain sagas has been put forward in some recent scholarship. Thomas Morcom (2020: 40–93), for example, suggests that *Morkinskinna*'s use of its *þættir* is best understood as consistently employing the effect of 'narrative insurrection', meaning a shifting of narrative attention onto disruptive or intrusive characters at the expense of the typically central figures of Norwegian kings. Similarly, I have argued elsewhere that dissonance between the content of dialogue verses and their prose contexts contributes significantly to the characterisation of poets in the *skáldasögur* (see Wilson 2021).

This short article explores these ideas in relation to two verses in *Heiðarvíga saga* spoken by Þuríðr Ólafsdóttir and Eiríkr víðsjá (see *Heið*: 277–278 and 299, sts. 3 and 10). Its concern is not the minor factual discrepancies that can arise between prose and verse accounts of events,<sup>3</sup> but rather the use of prosimetrical forms to set up contestatory narrating perspectives against one another. Both verses are framed in the text as confrontational responses to the way in which Barði Guðmundarson, the saga's protagonist, attempts to take vengeance for his brother Hallr; each is to some extent discordant, either in how its content diverges from the prose narrative or in its placement within the wider text. Indeed, the incorporation of these stanzas leads to the saga's central revenge narrative being

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3 An example of such a discrepancy is the number of men killed in the battle on the heath, different figures for which are given in Eiríkr víðsjá's and Tindr Hallkelsson's stanzas, as well as in the prose (see Poole 1991: 187).



destabilised at key moments. Yet it is precisely the framing of the verses as intrusive, their voices vying with the prose narrator for attention, that connects the poetry to the text's wider thematic concerns, specifically those to do with the conflict in saga society between concurrent yet competing approaches to vengeance. As detailed below, Barði has specific motivations for taking revenge in a moderate, restrained manner, yet his approach is at times called into question by his allies when they feel that it does not go far enough. The saga's encoding of apparently dissonant voices through verse quotation mirrors this concern, with the detailed, meticulous plotting of the prose challenged by the plosive form and battle-eager imagery of skaldic poetry. The article therefore suggests that the saga's prosimetrum may be productively read as being shaped to foreground, rather than to downplay, the disruptive potential of verse quotation.

Before proceeding to the analysis, it is important to acknowledge that any reading of *Heiðarvígá saga* will be affected by the unfortunate state in which its sole surviving manuscript, Holm. Perg. 18 4to, is preserved.<sup>4</sup> The first section of the manuscript was lost before the saga left Iceland in the seventeenth century. Its next twelve leaves were destroyed in the Copenhagen Fire of 1728, as was the only copy made by Jón Ólafsson; a summary was written by Jón from memory in 1730, but this represents a less secure version of the text. A further leaf, cut from the manuscript before it left Iceland, was found in 1911, but in a significantly damaged state. All this has resulted in a text that can hardly be read as an entirely cohesive work, given the degree to which its extant narrative is marked out by absences and disjunctions: the major lacuna at its beginning; the minor lacunae where the texts of the extant medieval witness, Jón's summary, and the damaged leaf are joined; and the stylistic break between Jón's summary and the surviving medieval sections. For a study of the saga's prosimetrum, there is a further obstacle: Jón's summary of the burnt section suggests that it quoted many verses that he did not attempt to reconstruct from memory. Only three of these verses are extant in other contexts – one by the *berserkr* Leiknir (see *Heið*: 223, st. 1), quoted in *Eyrbyggja saga* but attributed to his brother Halli (see *Eb*: 73, st. 21), and two by Gestr (see *Heið*: 237, st. 2 and n. 1), preserved in manuscripts of *Laufás Edda* (see *LaufE*: 371 and 405–406) – but because of their relatively insecure prose context, it is difficult to make strong claims about their use in the saga's medieval form.

It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to produce a holistic literary reading of the extant *Heiðarvígá saga*. Previous attempts at literary interpretation, such as those by Bjarni Guðnason (1993) and Robin Waugh (2011), have tried to treat the text as a relatively unified work, but have offered rather tenuous conclusions.<sup>5</sup> In response to such readings, Joanne Shortt Butler (2020: 148) suggests that “it may be necessary to reconcile ourselves to the

4 The manuscript has been digitised on the website *manuscripta.se*, where it is listed under the title ‘Isl. Perg. 4:o 18’. An excellent account of the saga's preservation context more generally is provided in Joanne Shortt Butler's (2020: 131–148) recent article, which forms the basis of the summary given here.

5 Bjarni suggests that *Heiðarvígá saga* is a sustained allegory linking the culture of revenge to the heathen past; for a detailed critique of his often dubious approach, see Alison Finlay (2003). Waugh's analysis of gender roles in the saga, which claims to account for a number of discrepancies in the text, relies on the reader accepting that Barði is affected by a ‘mistake-of-gender charm’ never mentioned by the saga, with the speculative nature of the reading acknowledged by Waugh (2011: 359) himself: “I would be very surprised if even some critics found my idea of a mistake-of-gender charm entirely convincing”.



contradictions of *Heiðarvíg saga* before we can give it a fairer reading” – that is, to accept the text in its present form as having been dramatically reshaped and reinscribed, in both cases literally, in ways that resist its being read as an entirely cohesive narrative. As regards its prosimetry, we may identify patterns in the extant saga’s use of verse, but we must keep in mind that such patterns are necessarily incomplete and fragmentary. In this regard, though, a willingness to accept the saga’s discordant prosimetry as being potentially artful has the advantage of allowing for careful identification of aesthetic qualities in the text’s use of verse, without needing to impose a unifying reading onto the saga itself.

The plot of the extant *Heiðarvíg saga* begins with an account of the conflicts between the overbearing Víga-Styrr and his peers, which eventually result in Styrr being killed by Gestr Þórhallsson to avenge his slain father. Gestr escapes his enemies, but the killing leads to a feud between Gestr’s relatives in Borgarfjörður and the followers of Snorri goði, Styrr’s father-in-law. Eventually, Barði’s brother Hallr is killed in Norway by some of the men of Borgarfjörður when he helps Kolskeggr, an ally of Snorri, escape them. Before Hallr can be avenged, however, his killers drown in a shipwreck, which is seen to complicate matters: “Þykkir nú mörgum mikit vandask við þat málit” (*Heið*: 254–255; “Now it seems to many that the case is becoming more precarious”). With his obvious targets for revenge now dead, Barði finds himself in the unenviable situation of needing to find a proxy from among their kinsmen – a difficult task in that the killers have many closely related kinsmen who could be targeted, meaning that Barði must justify his choice of a specific opponent. Barði’s foster-father Þórarinn suggests that he should therefore adopt a patient approach: “þarf hér þolinmæði við, því margir eru jafnan at frændsemi” (*Heið*: 255; “there is a need for patience here because many are equally closely related”). The rest of the saga, preserved mostly in its extant medieval section, focuses on Barði’s methodical preparations for his revenge, culminating in the *heiðarvíg* (“battle on the heath”) and its aftermath.

The restrained approach that Barði takes in obtaining vengeance for his brother is generally praised in the saga’s prose. When Barði, following Þórarinn’s advice, asks for compensation at the *alþingi* for a second time, he is commended for showing patience to his opponents: “allr þingheimrinn lofaði, hversu spakliga var at málinu farit” (*Heið*: 256; “all those at the assembly praised how peaceably the case was being undertaken”). After Barði specifically requests compensation from a combative man named Gísli, the contrast between the parties is again highlighted in Barði’s favour: “Gera menn nú mikinn róm at máli Barða, ok þykkir þungliga svarat, með slíku spaklæti, sem þessa er beizk” (*Heið*: 259; “There was now great assent for Barði’s claim, and it seemed that it had been harshly answered, given the restraint with which this had been requested”). Barði’s patient performance at the *alþingi* is matched by the methodical way in which Þórarinn plans the recruitment of men to accompany Barði on his journey and the plan of action to be undertaken on their arrival in Borgarfjörður. His thorough approach is mirrored in the form of the prose, where Þórarinn’s plans are outlined in exceptional detail through unusually long passages of direct speech (see *Heið*: 264–268 and 282–286). Þórarinn is thus framed as a dominant narrating presence in the saga, with his advocacy of restraint being centred. The plan is still intended to result in blood-vengeance, but the saga’s structure foregrounds the remarkably intricate nature of its preparations, which delay the killing of Barði’s enemies both in practical terms – over three years pass before Barði initiates the revenge expedition – and in a narrative sense.

By contrast, the two stanzas analysed here are framed as intrusive voices that challenge the methodical planning outlined above by demanding a more obviously violent, warlike approach to vengeance. The first is spoken by Þuríðr, Barði's mother, in an attempt to incite her sons to seek vengeance (see *Heið*: 276–277).<sup>6</sup> After three portions of the men's breakfast go missing, Þuríðr serves a large piece of meat to each of her sons, declaring that their brother Hallr was carved up into even bigger chunks; she also places a stone before each of them, and claims that their failure to have taken revenge is equivalent to their having swallowed such stones. Finally, she walks up and down the hall howling with rage and speaks a verse:

Brátt munu Barða frýja  
beiðendr þrimu seiða;  
Ullr, munt ættar spillir,  
undlinns, taliðr þinnar,  
nema lýbrautar látir  
láðs valdandi falda,  
lýðr nemi ljóð, sem kvóðum,  
lauðhyrs boða rauðu (*Heið*: 277–278, st. 3).

The *requesters of the coalfish of battle* [= sword; its requesters = warriors] will taunt Barði shortly; *Ullr of the wound-snake* [= sword; Ullr = god; god of the sword = warrior, i. e. Barði], *ruler of the pollack-road of land* [pollack of land = snake; its road = gold; its ruler = man, i. e. Barði], [you] will be reckoned the destroyer of your family, unless [you] cause the *messengers of foam-fire* [= gold; its messengers = men] to be cloaked in red; may people learn the poem as we have recited it.

Through the use of martial kennings (“beiðendr seiða þrimu”, “Ullr undlinns”) and the bloody imagery of Barði being told to cloak men in red (“látir falda boða lauðhyrs rauðu”), Þuríðr frames the conflict over Hallr's death predominantly in terms of violence. She also focuses on shame and public opinion in claiming that Barði will be taunted by others, even reckoned the destroyer of his family (“spillir ættar þinnar”), if he avoids violent conflict. Her injunction that others learn the poem as recited (“nemi lýðr ljóð, sem kvóðum”) plays into the latter concern, implying that the stanza itself may stand as a monument to Barði's shame if he fails to take revenge in a sufficiently forceful way.

Yet despite the highly evocative, dramatic feel of Þuríðr's performance, her attempt to incite her sons is undermined by their already having prepared to take revenge for their brother. By this point, Barði has gathered a large number of supporters to seek vengeance with him, most of whom are assembled there in advance of the expedition. Rolf Heller (1958: 114) therefore argues that the scene is either essentially redundant or unfortunately positioned in the saga, highlighting the jarring effect that its inclusion has in the wider narrative context. Anne Heinrichs (1970: 17) suggests similarly that the scene interrupts the established narrative pattern of Barði repeatedly meeting with Þórarinn to plan the revenge expedition; the pair arrange at the end of the previous chapter (ch. 21) to speak the next day, but Þuríðr's intervention delays their meeting in a narrative sense until the following chapter (ch. 23). The prosimetrical episode therefore reads as if it is introducing a dissonant

6 If Jón's summary is accurate, this is the second time that Þuríðr attempts to incite her sons (see *Heið*: 254).



voice into the text, one set apart both by the demands made in its content and by its presence disrupting the established formal rhythms of the narrative.

Though the verse has its intended effect, with the men leaving their breakfast to ready themselves for the journey, Þuríðr then attempts to ride with them, claiming that they will need further inciting to go through with the mission. In response, Barði has his kinsmen Óláfr and Dagr unseat her, push her into a river, and take her horse with them (see *Heið*: 278–279).<sup>7</sup> This has led some scholars to interpret the scene as the text’s rejection of the kind of vengeance advocated by Þuríðr; Alison Finlay (2003: 77), for instance, argues that Þuríðr’s unseating, “like the redundancy of her egging, shows her to be out of step with the predominant, male, direction of events in the saga”. Yet Barði seems to some extent willing to accommodate the initial incitement; when Koll-Gríss notices the missing breakfast portions, Barði tells him to proceed as planned: “Hef þú fram borð [...] ok rœð ekki um þat fyrir qðrum mǫnnum” (*Heið*: 276–277; “Set up the tables [...] and do not speak of this in front of anyone”). Barði’s initial response may be seen as an attempt to accommodate, and thereby control, Þuríðr’s intervention, so as to allow her incitement to motivate the men without destabilising his wider plans. It is only when his mother attempts to maintain her presence in their group – in a sense, to retain her narrative centrality – that Barði neutralises her in humiliating fashion.

The idea that Þuríðr is out of step with a supposedly ‘male’ approach to vengeance in the saga is also undermined by the similar objections made by Barði’s comrades to his patient approach to revenge.<sup>8</sup> Þórarinn’s plan is for Barði to kill Gísli Þorgautsson, an easy target among the Borgfirðingar, then to retreat with the men to the northern side of Flói, where they can easily defend themselves against their inevitable pursuers (see *Heið*: 282–286). Yet Barði apparently does not tell his companions the plan, as they are disappointed by his urging them to flee after he kills Gísli; instead, the men complain that Barði has not achieved much and insist on eating their breakfast: “Barði bað ekki hirða um dögurð; þeir kváðusk eigi vilja fasta, – ‘ok þat kunnu vér eigi ætla, hvé þér myndi undan, ef þú hefðir nǫkkut þat gort, er frami væri at.’ [...] Nú matask þeir” (*Heið*: 296; “Barði asked them to pay no mind to breakfast. They said they did not want to fast – ‘and we don’t know how you would [want to get] away if you had done something that was to your credit.’ [...] Now they eat”).<sup>9</sup> The saga draws an intriguing parallel here with the men’s abandonment of their

7 While sagas often depict women as inciting feuds, it is rarer for them to be shown to join their male kinsmen in taking vengeance. A notable exception is Þorgerðr Egilsdóttir, Þuríðr’s mother, who in *Laxdæla saga* incites her sons to take revenge on Bolli Þorleiksson for the death of their brother (and Bolli’s foster-brother) Kjartan, then accompanies them on the mission (see *Laxd*: 161–168). Scholars have contrasted the women’s varying levels of success in accompanying their kinsmen to seek revenge, invariably to Þorgerðr’s favour (see Heller 1958: 113–115; Bjarni Guðnason 1993: 66–91; Finlay 2003: 76–78).

8 This is not to say that the textual response to these objections is not gendered. Þuríðr is humiliated by her son when she is seen to go too far in demanding a violent approach to revenge. By contrast, when the men in Barði’s group make similar demands, he is more careful to make concessions to them, as is discussed below.

9 The reaction of Barði’s men is comparable to that of Snorri goði after he has Þorsteinn Gíslason killed, when he urges his men, despite their misgivings, to camp and eat in a nearby field overnight, rather than to flee the district with any sense of urgency (see *Heið*: 249). The incident causes the Borgfirðingar to adopt a law obliging all men to check their lands for the killers if a slaying were to take place in the district (see *Heið*: 250), providing another reason for Barði, unlike Snorri, to proceed with caution.



breakfast on Þuríðr's urging. While they were eager to leave their meal to pursue the martial vengeance demanded by Þuríðr, they refuse to do so when it seems to them that Barði's cautious plan may not lead to any such show of force.

The same tensions surface again among the men in their retreat from Borgarfjörðr, when, on seeing Gísli's allies chasing after them, Barði's companions become excited at the prospect of battle. Barði urges the men to continue the retreat, reassuring them that their enemies will follow: "Förum undan enn of hríð, ok eigi at minni ván, at þat kostgæfi eptirforna" (*Heið*: 299; "Let us retreat for a while yet, and there is no less expectation that it will push on their pursuit"). Yet Eiríkr viðsjá responds with a verse in which he declares that Barði wants the men to stand their ground:

Flykkjask frægir rekkar,  
fúss es herr til snerru;  
þjóð tekr hart á heiði  
herkunn dragask sunnan;  
fara biðr hvergi herja  
harðráðr fyrir Barði  
geira hreggs frá glyggvi  
gunnnórunga sunnan (*Heið*: 299, st. 10).

Famous champions gather; the host is eager for battle; the well-known troop from the south draws together quickly on the heath; Barði, firm in counsel, commands the host not to flee in any way from the *wind of the storm of spears* [= battle] of *battle-nourishers* [= warriors] from the south.

Eiríkr's stanza does not use the bloody imagery of Þuríðr's, but it similarly centres a feeling of battle-eagerness through repeated references to warriors ("rekkar", "herr", "gunnnórunga") and to battle itself ("snerru", "glyggvi hreggs geira"). Of course, its central claim directly contradicts the prose account, with the disparity made explicit in Barði's reproach of Eiríkr: "Eigi segir þú nú satt [...] þat mæltu ek, at hvern fari sem má, þar til er vér komum til vígis þess, er fóstri minn mælti, at vér skyldim neyta í nyrðra Flóanum" (*Heið*: 300; "You are not now speaking truthfully [...] I said that each one should ride [as fast] as he could until we reach that battleground that my foster-father said we should use on the northern side of Flói"). The dissonance is reinforced by Eiríkr's use of the term "harðráðr" ("firm in counsel") to describe Barði.<sup>10</sup> While the term as used in the verse seems to be praising of Barði, it takes on an ironic tone in the prose context, where he seems to have lost control over the group. Again, the verse seems to have its intended effect: the men ignore Barði and insist on fighting at a closer, but less easily defensible, site (see *Heið*: 300).<sup>11</sup>

Eiríkr's verse therefore reads as the culmination of a growing dissent among Barði's companions, who challenge his attempts to retain a measure of control over the events of their expedition. Though Barði is clearly motivated by the need to gain a tactical advantage

10 While the term *harðráðr* is often read as having negative connotations of being a harsh leader, largely because of its association with Haraldr harðráði, Finlay (2015: 99–100) argues that it can be more positively translated as "resolute", "strong-minded", or, in the case of this stanza, "firm in counsel".

11 The dissonant aspects of the verse are notable in comparison to the framing of Eiríkr's stanzas elsewhere in the saga as more straightforward accounts of the battle, especially in the final three stanzas (see *Heið*: 322–323, sts. 15–17). If Russell Poole (1991: 189) is accurate in suggesting that these verses were originally a cohesive *flokkr* about the events of the battle, it is intriguing that the saga is structured so that one of these verses directly clashes with the overarching prose narrative.

over his enemies, his insistence on acting in a performatively restrained way angers his comrades, leading Eiríkr to construct a different, fictive account of events. As much as Eiríkr's mocking claims fit a wider narrative pattern already established in the prose, the saga's inclusion of skaldic verse stands out in the scene, in that the distinct form and cultural associations of the poetry arguably frame Eiríkr as a more authoritative narrating presence. In a sense, Barði is tacitly critiqued here for not engaging his enemies in a way that would make for good poetry; in reciting this verse, Eiríkr puts forward an alternative account more formally suited to the endorsement and memorialisation of martial glory. The stanza's plosive interruption of the prose even mirrors Eiríkr's seizing of authority from Barði, with the failure of Barði's reproach to influence the men reinforcing the triumph in this instance of skaldic narrating strategies over the competing voices of the prose.

Of course, that triumph can be understood only as momentary, as Barði's methodical approach and the demands of the men to gain honour in fighting ultimately converge in the *heiðarvíg* itself. As the battle approaches, Barði rouses his companions with inspiring speeches and taunts his enemies for perceived cowardice (see *Heið*: 300–302). Meanwhile, the stanzas spoken by Eiríkr during the battle are framed more straightforwardly as injunctions for himself and the men to fight bravely against their opponents (see *Heið*: 300 and 304, sts. 11–12). With the climactic onset of violence, the tensions depicted in the text about how revenge should be taken become less vital; correspondingly, the previously competing voices in both prose and verse align more closely with one another. Yet in the tense build-up to that cathartic battle, the saga's interest in the conflicted nature of feud discourse seems to be reflected in its encoding of these dissonant stanzas, whose voices intrude into its narrative in ways that destabilise its overall form, but that also mirror the text's wider depiction of feud as a tangled nexus of contestatory attitudes towards revenge.

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