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A Tale of Two Poets: Egill Skallagrímsson and Einarr skálaglamm

Egils saga Skallagrímssonar is renowned for the poetry it contains as well as for its narrative prose. By far the largest quantity of the verse transmitted in redactions of the saga is attributed to its protagonist, Egill Skallagrímsson, himself, but a small number of verses are ascribed to other participants in the narrative, including two *dróttkvætt lausavisur* said to have been composed and recited by another, younger Icelandic skald, Einarr Helgason skálaglamm. Both verses appear in the Mǫðruvallahók (A-redaction) text of the saga. They are absent from the B-redaction, while the C-redaction, represented by two seventeenth-century copies of a medieval exemplar, written by Ketill Jörundsson (AM 453 and 462 4to), has only the second verse. Both verses also appear in manuscripts of *Jómsvíkinga saga*,¹ where Einarr figures as a poet of Earl Hákon Sigurðarson. It has generally been accepted (cf. Bjarni Einarsson 1975: 106–14) that *Egils saga* has acquired the verses and the accompanying prose text from *Jómsvíkinga saga*, which is the earlier work, usually thought to have been written c. 1200 or a little before that (Bjarni Einarsson 1975: 105; Ólafur Halldórsson 1993; Megaard 2000). Aside from the citation of some of Egill's verses in manuscripts of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* and Óláfr Þórðarson's *Third Grammatical Treatise*, where they appear as examples of various kinds of poetic diction, Einarr's two verses are the only ones in *Egils saga* that also occur in a separate textual tradition. It is the purpose of this article to suggest why the redactor of *Egils saga* in its A-version found it suitable to his literary purposes to insert the Einarr episode and its accompanying verses at this point in his narrative of Egill's life.

According to his saga and the manuscripts in which it has been transmitted, Egill's poetic output consisted in at least 49 complete or fragmen-

¹ And in texts derived from this saga, including Flateyjarbók, which has a version of both of Einarr's stanzas.

tary *lausavisur*² and no less than six long poems. Whereas all but one of the *lausavisur* have been transmitted within manuscripts of the saga, the long poems have had a much less secure transmission history. Several of those who have edited or worked on the manuscript transmission of the saga over the last 130 years have concluded that the long poems as extended compositions were probably not originally included in the saga text and were arguably not intended to be part of it (Finnur Jónsson 1886–8: xxx; Jón Helgason 1969: 163; Chesnutt in Bjarni Einarsson 2001: xxxix). This assessment does not imply that it was not the intention of the saga author and early redactors to mention Egill's long poems. In fact I shall argue that the mention and quotation of one or two stanzas from the long poems within the saga text served an important purpose, to enhance Egill's reputation as a poet, and particularly as a courtly, if not a typical, court poet, and that the narrative of his encounter with Einarr skálaglamm was intended to contribute to that image.

Of the six long poems attributed to Egill, three survive only as fragments within the *Mǫðruvallabók* (A) redaction of the saga text, while the other three are extant in more or less complete form in one or more of the three main saga redactions, A, B and C.³ These latter are among the poetry for which Egill is most famous. They are *Höfuðlausn* ("Head Ransom"), his ironic praise poem in honour of King Eiríkr blóðøx, composed to save his life when he came into his adversary's power at York in England, *Sonatorrek* ("Hard Loss of Sons"), a moving elegy in which Egill laments the loss of various members of his family, including two of his sons, and *Arinbjarnarkviða* ("Poem for Arinbjörn"), a heartfelt encomium of his loyal and generous friend, the Norwegian *hersir* Arinbjörn Þórisson.

² Finnur Jónsson (1912–15 A 1: 34–60 and B 1: 30–53) did not count Egill's juvenilia in his output and so gives a lower figure. There were probably more verses attributed to Egill than even appear in the fullest medieval version of his saga, the *Mǫðruvallabók* manuscript. This has three lacunae where the scribes clearly expected to insert a verse, but no verse was inserted, nor do the other two redactions of the saga have corresponding verses at these points (cf. Bjarni Einarsson 2001: xxix and 2003: x–xi).

³ For a clear account of the three major redactions, see the Preface to Bjarni Einarsson's 2001 edition (xix–xxiv) and the English summary by Michael Chesnutt on pp. lxvi–ii. The state of preservation of the three long poems is not good; *Höfuðlausn* is preserved in the B- and C-redactions, but not in A; *Sonatorrek* is found in the C-redaction only, but the first stanza is cited in *Mǫðruvallabók*, while the preservation of *Arinbjarnarkviða* is the most precarious of all, as it survives on the leaf immediately following the end of the saga in *Mǫðruvallabók* (fol. 99v), now in an almost illegible condition, and in no other medieval manuscript. For an account of this poem's manuscript history and a transcription, see Bjarni Einarsson 2001: xxxix–xliii and Appendix I. A poem about Arinbjörn is mentioned in the saga's prose in M and a space left for a verse, which was never filled in, cf. Bjarni Einarsson 2001: 150, ll. 107–8; fol 95rb.

The three poems preserved only as fragments are *Aðalsteinsdrápa* (“poem with a refrain for Athelstan”), *Skjaldardrápa* (“poem with a refrain about a shield”) and *Berudrápa* (also “poem with a refrain about a shield”), all of which are preserved only in *Mǫðruvallabók* among medieval exemplars, apart from two lines of a *stef* (“refrain”) of *Aðalsteinsdrápa*, which is attested in all three redactions of the saga. *Aðalsteinsdrápa*, as its name suggests, is a praise-poem in honour of King Athelstan of England, and conforms well to the model of the skaldic encomium. From what remains of it, we can say that it is very likely to have been composed and performed in England (Jesch 2001). Both *Skjaldardrápa* and *Berudrápa* belong, so far as we can tell from their titles and surviving verses,⁴ to the skaldic genre that corresponds to the classical ekphrasis, or verbal description of an object (Lie 1956).

The author and medieval redactors of *Egils saga*, who clearly wanted to celebrate the saga protagonist’s reputation as a skald, faced a problem which was not encountered by the composers of any other of the skald sagas, that sub-genre of the *Íslendingasögur* whose core is formed by *Kormaks saga*, *Hallfreðar saga*, *Bjarnar saga Hitdœlakappa* and *Gunnlaugs saga*, and in which *Egils saga*, *Fóstbrœðra saga* and possibly other sagas are “outliers” (Clunies Ross 2001).⁵ The authors of the skald sagas refrained from recording more than a fragment of their protagonists’ output that was composed for Scandinavian rulers and other dignitaries;⁶ unlike them, however, the author of *Egils saga* could not count on there being any record of courtly poetry ascribed to his subject in other genres of Old Icelandic writing, especially in kings’ sagas, where the court poetry of skalds such as Hallfreðr and Kormakr is mainly extant. Egill Skallagrímsson enjoyed a hostile relationship with the Norwegian king Eiríkr blóðøx, which, aside from a number of *lausavísur*, produced one “head ransom” poem that was not recorded at all in the kings’ saga tradition. This is hardly surprising, as the majority of scholars who have studied Egill’s *Höfuðlausn* consider it to consist in hollow praise of Eiríkr

⁴ The title *Berudrápa* is attested in *Mǫðruvallabók* (Bjarni Einarsson 2001: 154, l. 36; fol. 96ra), but the title *Skjaldardrápa* is not given in the saga prose.

⁵ Bjarni Einarsson (1975: 193–218) has argued for the direct literary influence of both *Hallfreðar saga* and *Kormaks saga* upon the author of *Egils saga*.

⁶ The reason for this reticence is probably the saga-authors’ awareness of generic proprieties, as Whaley (2001: 301–3) has suggested. It is likely to have been considered inappropriate to use skaldic verse that provided evidence of the activities of kings and earls (or appeared to do so) within a text whose main focus was upon the skald as the protagonist of a family saga, where generic conventions required his poetry to be presented as part of the narrative that involved him as a participant.

(cf. Kries and Krömmelbein 2002). According to the saga, Egill also spent some time at the court of King Athelstan of England, and *Aðalsteinsdrápa* was the outcome of this relatively “normal” relationship between poet and patron, but the preservation of this poem — merely one stanza and one two-line refrain — is found only in manuscripts of *Egils saga*, and that fragmentarily. The sum total of Egill’s indisputably courtly verse is, therefore, rather meagre and hardly mainstream as far as the medieval Icelandic manuscript tradition was concerned and yet, paradoxically, this skald is the subject of a saga set largely outside Iceland, in which his relationships with foreign authority figures, like Eiríkr, Aðalsteinn and Arinbjörn, are important. It might therefore be supposed that the saga would wish to boost Egill’s image as a poet who was fully competent in some at least of the major kinds of courtly poetry of the Viking Age, which we can characterise as the encomium or praise poem, the genealogical poem, the *erfidrápa* or memorial poem, and the ekphrasis, or poetry descriptive of an object or image (Fidjestøl 1993).

If we consider Egill’s two other long poems besides *Hofudlausn*, namely *Sonatorrek* and *Arinbjarnarkviða*, they cannot easily be aligned with any of the sub-genres of the skaldic courtly tradition because they have a strongly personal orientation. The chances of their preservation in other Norse textual traditions outside that of the sagas of Icelanders was therefore very low, and, as we have seen, their incorporation as whole poems into the fabric of *Egils saga* was probably not the intention of the original saga author either, although it is likely that he would have assumed a knowledge of these poems in his audience and gained literary resonance for his protagonist merely by mentioning them or quoting a single stanza from them, as we find the redactor of the *Mǫðruvallabók* text doing.⁷ Some of *Sonatorrek*’s clearest affinities are with eddic genres of lament poetry (Sävborg 1997), but insofar as the poem reviews the demise of Egill’s family line, it may be seen to have some connection with courtly genealogical poetry, such as *Ynglingatal*, which reviews a royal or noble dynasty.⁸ Although the latter part of *Arinbjarnarkviða* is an encomium for Egill’s friend Arinbjörn Þórisson, the first part focuses

⁷ It is probable that Snorri Sturluson, whom many suppose to have been the author of *Egils saga*, knew some version of both *Sonatorrek* and *Arinbjarnarkviða*, as stanzas from both are quoted in some manuscripts of his *Edda* of c. 1225 (*Sonatorrek* stanzas 23 and 24/1–4 and *Arinbjarnarkviða* stanzas 8/1–4 and 17/5–8). A poem about Arinbjörn, which is generally thought to be *Arinbjarnarkviða*, was also known to Óláfr Þórðarson, who quotes the stanzas usually numbered 15, 24 and 25 in the *Third Grammatical Treatise* (c. 1250).

⁸ There is a metrical connection between both *Sonatorrek* and *Arinbjarnarkviða* and courtly genealogical poetry too, in that they all favour the *kviðuhátt* verse-form.

on the poet himself and gives a much more personalised and detailed account of his “head ransom” encounter with Eiríkr blóðøx than we find in *Höfuðlausn*.

Much of the narrative of *Egils saga* is relatively tightly linked to episodes in its protagonist’s life, and these episodes are illustrated with many *lausavisur*. However, towards the end of the saga, Egill’s biography reaches a certain stasis, as he declines physically into old age and stays put in Iceland, and it is precisely here that the saga author, or more plausibly the redactor of the A-text, introduces a concentration of poetic references. To what extent the original text of *Egils saga* included actual quotation of poetic texts remains an open question, though some were certainly included, and others were almost certainly mentioned. Indeed, the mere mention of poems would have been as good as their extended citation from a narratological point of view, provided the audience accepted the likelihood of their existence.

The chapter numbered variously 78 (so Finnur Jónsson 1886–8, followed by Sigurður Nordal 1933) or 80 (Bjarni Einarsson 2001 and 2003) is very long and rich in poetic reference. It begins by mentioning the marriage of Þorgerðr Egilsdóttir, but then moves to describe how Egill’s eldest son Þóðvarr was drowned in a boating accident and how his father reacted by withdrawing to his bed-chamber, intent on starving himself to death, and how his resourceful daughter Þorgerðr tricked him into eating some salty seaweed and quenching his thirst with milk which he mistook for water. In most modern editions this well-known episode leads into the quotation of *Sonatorrek*, though only the late C-redaction manuscripts have extended quotation of this poem. The prose saga continues with a short account of Egill’s old age at Borg and a resumé of Norwegian political history, leading then to the mention of his friend Arinbjörn, who had returned to Norway with King Haraldr Eiríksson. The prose text states that, upon hearing this news, Egill composed a poem about Arinbjörn, *ok er þetta upphaf at*, “and this is the beginning of it” (Bjarni Einarsson 2003: 155). Thus runs the text of *Mǫðruvallabók*, which, as we have seen, leaves a gap for the verse, though none was inserted here. The B- and C-redactions indicate that Egill sent the poem to Arinbjörn in Norway, an interesting anachronism that may assume a written mode of transmission. Most modern editors then insert the reconstructed text of *Arinbjarnarkviða* at this point.

Immediately after the Arinbjörn material, and still in the same chapter, the younger Icelandic skald Einarr Helgason skálaglamm is introduced and most of the rest of the chapter is devoted to a mini-narrative

about him and his dealings with Egill. It is here that the material which also appears in *Jómsvíkinga saga* is incorporated into the *Egils saga* narrative. This section adds to the existing tally of verses in the chapter the two ascribed to Einarr and one stanza of Egill's *Skjaldardrápa* (at least according to *Mǫðruvallabók*). Before looking at this material in detail, it should also be mentioned that the *Mǫðruvallabók* version of the following chapter (79 or 81) contains mention of the second of Egill's shield poems, *Berudrápa*.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the general narrative function of the two fragments of shield poems and the narratives that motivate Egill's composition of them, according to the *Mǫðruvallabók* text of the saga, is to enhance his status as a poet capable of composing in one of the oldest and highest status genres of the skaldic art. The high status of ekphrasis can be inferred from the extensive treatment given to such poetry in manuscripts of Snorri's *Edda* and the rank of several of the genre's most important practitioners among the chief skalds of the Viking Age. These include the Norwegian Bragi Boddason, whose *Ragnarsdrápa* describes scenes painted on an ornate shield that his patron, perhaps Ragnarr loðbrók, had given him; Þjóðólfr of Hvinir, also a Norwegian, whose *Haustlǫng* describes a similar object depicting two mythological scenes, and Úlfr Uggason, an Icelander who composed the poem *Húsdrápa* about the magnificent carvings on the walls of a hall at Hjarðarholt and about the Icelandic chieftain Óláfr pái Hǫskuldsson, who had it built. Both the hall and Úlfr's poem are also mentioned in *Laxdæla saga* (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934: 80). This last example indicates that, while the genre of ekphrasis was particularly suited to the courts of Norwegian kings and princes, Icelanders who had pretensions to aristocratic or royal connections also patronised it (cf. Whaley 1998: 35 and Guðrún Nordal 2001: 130–1). By attributing two shield poems to Egill, the author of *Egils saga* (or a later redactor) places him in a select company of courtly skalds, but the two narratives that explain how he came to compose them offer an unusual perspective on his role as both the recipient of an ornate shield and as the composer of a poem about the gift. Both these roles were usually played by a court poet. The role of donor of the shield is played in each case by someone with Norwegian associations, but in each case that person has reason to distrust Norwegian authority. Thus the saga succeeds in maintaining a distance from the major seat of royal power, viewed from an Icelandic perspective, while nevertheless associating the gift with Norwegian royalty or aristocracy.

The circumstances in which Egill is said to have composed *Berudrápa*

will be considered briefly before turning to the more complex background to *Skjaldardrápa*. According to chapter 79 or 81 of the saga (Sigurður Nordal 1933: 274–6; Bjarni Einarsson 2003: 167–8), a ship from Norway came out to Iceland one summer under the command of a Norwegian named Þormóðr, who was a retainer of Þorsteinn, son of Arinbjörn's sister Þóra and the Norwegian *lendr maðr* Eiríkr alspakr. Þormóðr brought with him to Iceland, as a present from Þorsteinn to Egill, an ornate shield, described as *ágætagripr*, “a very valuable possession”, and this occasioned his composition of *Berudrápa*. Although the saga narrative does not make this point here, it is clear from earlier chapters that Þorsteinn was under a considerable obligation to Egill, so the gift did not come out of the blue. Þorsteinn's indebtedness was a consequence of the long Vermaland episode as the saga tells it. Egill took on the dangerous mission, imposed by King Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri, of collecting the king's unpaid tribute from Earl Arnviðr of Vermaland, a mission which had previously cost the lives of those who undertook it and which, Egill told his friend, was almost certainly a way of humiliating Þorsteinn and driving him from Norway, along with others of the king's enemies, including Þorsteinn's uncle Arinbjörn who, the king had heard, had joined the sons of Eiríkr blóðøx in Denmark. Egill undertook the Vermaland journey himself, along with three other men, and thus saved his friend from mortal danger. After Egill's mission had turned out successfully, King Hákon permitted Þorsteinn to remain on his lands and live in friendship with him. The episode describing Egill's adventures in Vermaland has something of the flavour of a picaresque novel and includes six of his *lausavísur* (cf. Bjarni Einarsson 1975: 253–65).

The circumstances surrounding Egill's composition of *Skjaldardrápa* are motivated by the mini-narrative about Einarr skálaglam, which, as we have seen earlier, may derive from a version of an already existing *Jómsvíkinga saga*, as Bjarni Einarsson thought. Bjarni (1975: 114–47) has pointed to other probable borrowings from *Jómsvíkinga saga* in *Egils saga*, and has analysed the differences between the Einarr material in the two sagas in some detail, but he did not offer a reason for its inclusion in *Egils saga* at this particular point.⁹

The kernel of the Einarr narrative seems to have developed around

⁹Very recently Michael Chesnutt, who is preparing editions of both the B- and C-redactions of *Egils saga* from Jón Helgason's unpublished papers, has presented a cogent argument, based on a comparison of the A-, B- and C-texts at this point, which indicates that the *Jómsvíkinga saga* material (together with Einarr's verses) originates with the A-redaction, and that the reduced form of the anecdote in C is interpolated from a manu-

two *lausavísur*, in the first of which the poet complains that he has been poorly rewarded by a patron for his poetry, which he has composed while other people were asleep. Versions of this verse (Finnur Jónsson 1912–15 A 1:131–2, B 1:124) differ significantly between *Egils saga* in *Mǫðruvallabók* (the only medieval manuscript of this saga to contain it) and manuscripts of *Jómsvíkinga saga* (Ólafur Halldórsson 1969: 178 and 215). However, in each case it is clear that the poet complains that his work has not been properly rewarded, and in the *Mǫðruvallabók* version alone he concludes the verse by announcing *fýsinn sóttak gram hinnig*, “I was eager to seek out a ruler in the other place” (Bjarni Einarsson 2003: 164). Interestingly enough, although *Mǫðruvallabók* has the only version of the stanza to include this remark, the prose of *Egils saga* makes nothing of it, nor does it make any use of the specific thrust of the second stanza, which is found in both the A- and C-redactions of the saga as well as in manuscripts of *Jómsvíkinga saga*. This second stanza clarifies Einarr’s intention: he proposes to visit a certain Sigvaldi (identified in *Jómsvíkinga saga* as Sigvaldi Strút-Haraldsson, leader of the *Jómsvíkingar*), and transfer his allegiance and his poetic skills to him. Interestingly again, the prose of *Egils saga* makes no mention at all of Sigvaldi, though it quotes a verse in which he is mentioned by name. This lack of cohesion between verse and prose strongly supports the hypothesis that the *Jómsvíkinga saga* material was incorporated into *Egils saga* at a relatively late stage in the latter’s textual history.

To judge by the content of the two verses, divorced from their surrounding prose in the two sagas in which they have been transmitted, the gist of the situation involving Einarr is that he has a patron who, he feels, has not given him sufficient reward and esteem for his poetic services. He therefore proposes to transfer his loyalties to someone else, named in the second verse as Sigvaldi. The two sagas offer a different explanation of the circumstances that led to the verses’ composition, but, in spite of the differences in detail, they follow a similar narrative pattern. In each case Einarr’s impulse to leave the niggardly patron, identified as Earl Hákon Sigurðarson, is thwarted by the Earl giving him a valuable reward in the form of a precious object. I will argue that it is the climax of this narrative pattern, the giving of the precious object, that particularly attracted the author of *Egils saga* to it, but that certain

script of A, while this material is completely lacking in B, which Chesnutt considers may represent an earlier stage in the saga text’s development. I am very much indebted to Michael Chesnutt for making his views available to me prior to their publication in *Opuscula* xii. *Bibliotheca Arnarnagæana* 44 (2005).

characteristics of the association between Einarr and Earl Hákon probably suited his purpose too and in effect deepened the narrative complexity of this part of the saga.

In *Jómsvíkinga saga*, we learn that Einarr was one of four Icelandic skalds in the entourage of Earl Hákon Sigurðarson and his son Eiríkr. The episode in which Einarr utters the two verses in question is situated chronologically in the period immediately before the battle of Hjörungavágr between the Earl and the Jómsvíkings. Hence Einarr is represented as threatening to transfer his loyalty from Earl Hákon to the latter's enemy. In the prose, he is made to complain that the Earl has shown him little honour (*sómi*) of late, compared to what he had formerly enjoyed, though no reason is given for the Earl's change of heart. Before he utters the second *lausavisa*, he makes as if to desert Hákon by leaving his ship. The Earl calls his bluff by offering him a valuable and very unusual gift, a pair of magical scales, made of burnished silver and gilded all over, which came with a set of weights that produced a noise (*glamm*) in the bowl by vibration when a particular weight turned out to be what the Earl wanted. This story is used in *Jómsvíkinga saga* to explain how Einarr's nickname changed from Skjaldmeyjar-Einarr ("Einarr of the shield-maiden"), as he was formerly known, to Einarr skálaglamm ("noise of the scales").¹⁰

The motivating narrative in *Egils saga* begins by informing the audience of Einarr's Icelandic genealogy and his aptitude for poetry, which he began to compose when he was young. There then follows a short account of how, one summer, he visited Egill Skallagrímsson's booth at the Althing, where they fell into conversation about poetry (*ok kom þar brátt talinu at þeir ræddu um skáldskap*). The stage is thus set for a deepening friendship between two poets, Egill the senior, Einarr the junior who nevertheless is often abroad serving noble men, following the normal path of a successful Icelandic skald. Although they are friends and fellow-poets who esteem one another, Einarr is here established as a foil to Egill in a number of respects: Einarr travels abroad as a poet serving noble men; Egill regales him with stories of his past adventures (*um ferðir*

¹⁰ Another etiological narrative connected with Einarr's nickname is given in the last chapter of *Jómsvíkinga saga* (Ólafur Halldórsson 1969: 205), which tells that Einarr was drowned in Breiðafjörður on a visit to Iceland, *ok heita þar af því Skáleyjar, að þar rak skálinnar á land, þær sem jarl gaf honum*, "and the place is called Skál-islands because the scales that the earl had given him drifted ashore there". Versions of this account are recounted in three manuscripts of *Jómsvíkinga saga*, in Arngrímur Jónsson's Latin synopsis and in *Landnámabók* (see Bjarni Einarsson 1975: 108–112 for references and a discussion). They may point to a more mundane etymology for Einarr's nickname, from *skáli*, m. 'hall, house'.

Egils ok stórvirki hans), which on the whole involved him in adversarial relationships with high-ranking men abroad; Einarr is a generous man (as the narrative here bears out), but often short of money (*Einarr var þorr maðr ok optast félitill*), whereas Egill is represented throughout his saga as being rather tight-fisted, very keen to acquire money, but not anxious to give it away, a trait he shares with his father Skallagrímr. Finally Einarr is the retainer (*hirðmaðr*) of Earl Hákon Sigurðarson, while Egill, for most of his life, has not been anyone's retainer.

The Mǫðruvallabók text of *Egils saga* mentions that Einarr was called *skálaglamm*, but does not indicate how he acquired the nickname, and then provides the motivation for Einarr's two *lausavísur* by explaining: *hann orti drápu um Hákon jarl er kǫlluð er Vellekla ok var þat mjök lengi at jarlinn vildi eigi hlýða kvæðinu, því at hann var reiðr Einari*, "he composed a *drápa* about Earl Hákon which is called *Vellekla* ("shortage of gold") and for a very long time the Earl refused to listen to the poem, because he was angry with Einarr". No reason for Hákon's anger is given, but Einarr's two *lausavísur* (or the second only, according to the C-redaction) are then quoted.¹¹ The redactor of the A-text thus associates Einarr's dissatisfaction with his poor recompense from Hákon for his composition of *Vellekla*, whose title, indeed, suggests perhaps a chronic shortage of appropriate reward. This poem is not mentioned at all in the *Jómsvíkinga saga* account. In the A-text of *Egils saga*, the general import of the verses is presented as the spur for Hákon's decision to listen to *Vellekla*, because he did not want Einarr to leave his entourage (*Jarlinn vildi eigi at Einarr færi á brott*). As Bjarni Einarsson has observed (1975: 112–4), the "author" of *Egils saga* ("Egils sagas forfatter") may have counted on his audience's knowledge of *Jómsvíkinga saga*'s contextualisation of the verse reference to Sigvaldi, even though he makes nothing of it himself, but it would, in any case, have created unwanted "noise" in his own narrative, so he was simply silent about it.¹² However, he needed the general sense of the verses to motivate the Earl's change of heart.

According to the A- and C-texts of *Egils saga*, Earl Hákon dissuades Einarr from leaving him by giving him a valuable gift, not the magical

¹¹ To the extent that unexplained anger with a poet, or reluctance to give a poet a hearing are fairly standard motifs in skald sagas (cf. Bjarni Einarsson 1975: 112), the A-text redactor may not have felt the need to elaborate on the Earl's motivation here.

¹² As Bjarni points out (1975: 111), the 'author' of *Egils saga* would also have run into obvious chronological problems if he had dwelt on the historical background to Earl Hákon's fight with the Jómsvíkingas, as he represents Egill in a later chapter as being in his eighties in the early part of Earl Hákon's reign (Bjarni Einarsson 2003: 180).

scales of *Jómsvíkinga saga*, but a shield, described as *in mesta gersimi*, “the greatest treasure”. A more elaborate description follows: *Hann var skrifaðr fornsögum, en allt milli skriptanna vǫru lagðar yfir spengr af gulli, ok settr steinum*, “It had scenes from ancient stories depicted on it, and everywhere between the pictures thin plates of gold were overlaid and it was ornamented with precious stones”. This is certainly a shield of inestimable value and without doubt one that could be expected to evoke a counter-prestation from the skald recipient in the shape of a magnificent, celebratory poem. However, it seems that Einarr did not react in the manner of a Bragi or a Þjóðólfr, but instead, according to *Egils saga*, departed for Iceland, where, after visiting his relatives, he came to stay at Egill’s farm at Borg. Evidently it was his intention to present the magnificent shield to Egill, but the latter was away from home. After he had still not returned when the customary three nights’ hospitality had expired, Einarr departed, leaving the shield as a gift for Egill. When Egill returned home, he became (or pretended to become) furious that Einarr had left him so much work to do (he of course recognised the convention that such a magnificent gift would require an equally magnificent poem in return), and threatened to ride after Einarr and kill him. Instead, however, the saga tells that Egill afterwards composed a *drápa* and gives the beginning of it (only extant in *Mǫðruvallabók*).

The mini-narrative concludes with a descent into bathos in the A- and C-texts, perhaps indicative of the intrusion of Icelandic realism into a story with aristocratic pretensions. Egill took the shield with him on a journey he made as a member of a bridal party, and on this trip the shield was damaged and thrown into a whey-cask. Nevertheless, true to form, Egill took care to recover the value of the gold in the decorative mounts! Thus a magnificent shield, originating as a gift from a Norwegian ruler to his Icelandic court poet, is passed on by this Icelfander to a fellow Icelfander and fellow poet, presumably in recognition of his superior status as a master skald. The master responds in a masterly way, by composing a shield poem, just as, in the *Berudrápa* episode which comes shortly afterwards, he composes yet another poem in this high-status courtly genre.

We cannot know whether either of Egill’s shield poems existed outside the two narratives that motivate their composition according to the saga. The single stanzas attesting to their existence are extant only in *Mǫðruvallabók* and their motivating narratives may well be authorial inventions, though in the case of the Einarr narrative, borrowed in essence from existing accounts connected with Earl Hákon and the

Jómsvíkings. It seems to me that their general purpose at this point in *Egils saga* is clear: it is to follow the citation or mention of other of Egill's major poems at the point where the saga runs out of a dynamic plot by boosting his image as a master skald capable of shield poetry in the grand, courtly manner. The difference is, however, that Egill does not need to compromise his Icelandic independence by accepting decorated shields from royalty. Rather, he receives these gifts from persons who have reason to distrust royalty; the shield that occasions *Berudrápa* is a present given to Egill in gratitude for his helping Þorsteinn Eiríksson deal with the hostility of King Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri, while the shield he receives from Einarr skálaglammi is a recycled gift Einarr obtained from Earl Hákon Sigurðarson, after he had complained about the Earl's nigardliness and threatened to abandon him for a political rival.

The semiotic import of Einarr's gift is complex and works within binary thematic oppositions already established in the text of *Egils saga*. It represents an act of generosity on the part of a court poet, who is said to be often short of money, towards an older (and presumably, in Einarr's eyes, better) poet who is known to be miserly and unpredictable in his behaviour, as well as hostile to Norwegian royalty. It effectively denies Hákon's gift its just courtly reward in Norway, namely a praise poem in which the skald lauds both the gift and the aristocratic giver (cf. Clunies Ross 1981), but that can be seen as Einarr's punishment of Hákon for not treating him as a noble patron should. The gift is instead deflected to Egill in Iceland and it thus becomes a different kind of prestation, namely the homage of a younger to an older skald, which allows the older man, though not without a mock protest, to give full rein to his ability to compose verse in the tradition of ekphrasis and thus demonstrate his superior skaldic status. The story of Einarr and Egill, most fully developed in the saga's A-redaction, thus contributes in a clever and multi-faceted way to the general semiotic significance of *Egils saga* as the biography of an atypical master skald who could have succeeded in the courtly world had circumstances been otherwise, and it provides the opportunity to include mention of two poems in the courtly ekphrastic tradition towards the end of the saga as "proof" of the protagonist's ability.

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