

Introduction

New Norse Studies: Essays on the Literature and Culture of Medieval Scandinavia is the third volume of collected essays to appear in *Islandica*, the series inaugurated in 1908 by Halldór Hermannsson, first curator of the Fiske Icelandic Collection at Cornell University. This long-lived series in Icelandic and Norse Studies was founded with a bequest from Willard Fiske (1831–1904), far-faring and passionate collector of rare books and manuscripts and professor of North European Languages as well as Cornell’s first university librarian and Gilded-Age man of letters.¹ Limiting oneself to Fiske’s wide-ranging *bibliophilic* interests—indicated only in part by the most famous collection that bears his name—one would have to mention an array of subjects extending from Iceland to the Italy of Dante and Petrarch, to Rhaeto-Romanic language and literature, and (as another of his collections, housed at the National and University Library of Iceland, still attests) to chess. Fiske’s desire to furnish an already rapidly expanding scholarly world with “an annual volume relating to Iceland and the [Fiske] Icelandic Collection” has been realized in diverse forms in the series’ one-hundred-seven-year history: first, primarily as a venue for

1. The curious reader is invited to consult the online exhibition devoted to Fiske’s life and work in 2005, *The Passionate Collector: Willard Fiske and his Libraries*, at <http://rnc.library.cornell.edu/collector/index.html>. Kristín Bragadóttir has published an extensive study of Fiske’s relationship with Iceland and the Icelanders in *Willard Fiske: vinur Íslands og velgjörðamaður* [friend and benefactor of Iceland] (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2008), of which an English translation is forthcoming.

bibliographical studies; then, with increasing frequency, as an organ for the publication of scholarly monographs and translations. Since its centenary in 2008, *Islandica* has also served as a forum for the publication of selected essays of interest to the scholar and student of Old Norse-Icelandic literature. This evolution was introduced by a gathering of articles on *Romance and Love in Late Medieval and Early Modern Iceland* (*Islandica* 54) in honor of Marianne Kalinke, edited by Kirsten Wolf and Johanna Denzin. That collection was preceded by a culling of critical studies by Joseph Harris, “*Speak Useful Words or Say Nothing*” (*Islandica* 53), bound with love in a single volume (to quote from one of Fiske’s aforementioned passions) by Susan E. Deskis and Thomas D. Hill.

The present collection of contributions by an international cohort of scholars is addressed primarily to the specialist (both fully fledged and *in ovo*) in the field of Old Norse-Icelandic Studies and adjacent habitats; nonetheless it is devoutly to be wished that many of the items gathered here will in addition be of use not only to the academic non-specialist but also to the patient general reader who alights on our field in some number. With the latter in mind, the authors have endeavored to render their essays (to borrow a phrase apocryphally attributed to Einstein), “as simple as possible, but not simpler.” Such a book can hope only to present a cross-section, not to document fully, the richness and vitality of a discipline that has burgeoned in recent decades. Its title means to suggest the scope of inquiry within its compass, whereas its claim to “newness” is twofold: certain of the authors open up new, or relatively unexcavated, fields of inquiry; others suggest fresh approaches to persisting problems. One contributor gently insisted that there is nothing “new” about him, but if the reader of these pages is occasionally reminded of the truth of Hegel’s dictum—that what is well known is not necessarily known well—this volume will have served its purpose.

It is not unusual for a gathering of articles destined for primarily academic consumption to be organized around a single, unifying theme. I alert the academic fellow traveler that no attempt has been made here to jigsaw the assembled essays onto the Procrustean bed of a solitary idea. While the volume thereby gains in breadth, this procedure admittedly runs the risk of pleasing no one: To the curious, perhaps gazing in from outside the academy, a compilation of studies

on “*The Literature and Culture of Medieval Scandinavia*” may already seem overspecialized (if not quite to the satisfaction of the scholar in the Nietzschean parable, who dares not speak of the leech as a whole but only of the *brain* of the leech); scholars of Old Norse literature, on the other hand, may wonder why such a book has not focused on some exciting new disciplinary subfield (if we are candid, most likely our own). Anyone inclined to digest these pieces as a whole, however, will notice intersecting and complementary—though, happily, not always *concurring*—approaches, interests, and themes at work among twelve scholars from six countries on three continents, all focused on diverse aspects of the medieval Scandinavian tradition. While it seems best to let these essays speak for themselves (lest their number swell to a *de facto* baker’s dozen due to a protracted introduction), a few words regarding the gist and drift of these studies, in the order in which they appear, will be welcome.

The first three chapters focus on the “background,” in various senses of the term, of saga narrative (although, one should note, not on a traditional quest for “origins”). Andy Orchard’s “Hereward and Grettir: Brothers from Another Mother?” makes the case for viewing the latter hero of the first half of his title and his eponymous saga in an Anglo-Latin context that, from a more conventional viewpoint, would be regarded by many as “in the wrong language and from the wrong period.” In “Jafnan segir inn ríkri ráð’: Proverbial Allusion and the Implied Proverb in *Fóstbrœðra saga*,” Richard L. Harris, our foremost student of the Icelandic proverb, advances the state of our thinking on the complex relationship between saga narrative and the many “idioms and saws” that readers have long noted therein. Torfi H. Tulinius, in “Seeking Death in *Njals saga*,” applies the insights of modern psychoanalysis to the grandest of the medieval Icelandic sagas, and (one might claim, although he does not) *vice versa*—thus illuminating both.

The four essays that follow are conjoined by marriage, if not by blood. Guðrún Nordal’s “Skaldic Poetics and the Making of the *Sagas of Icelanders*” and Russell Poole’s “Identity Poetics among the Icelandic Skalds” are both concerned with the fraught nexus of skaldic poetry and saga narrative—each in turn emphasizing what the formal characteristics of the former reveal about the cultural milieu of saga writing and skaldic poetry, respectively. My own “Loki, *Sneglu-Halla*

þátrr, and the Case for a Skaldic Prosaics” reexamines the relationship of skaldic poetics and medieval Icelandic prose narrative, with a marked shift in focus towards the latter. Writing in a similar vein, Thomas D. Hill, in his *tour de force*, “Beer, Vomit, Blood, and Poetry: *Egils saga*, Chapters 44–45,” reveals an analogue to the myth of Kvasir (told in Snorri’s *Edda*) that informs the saga in question, thus likewise addressing the confluence of mythic and mundane narratives in saga literature.

The next two studies deal with issues of gender in the medieval and post-medieval period. Shaun F. D. Hughes, in “The Old Norse *Exempla* as Arbiters of Gender Roles in Medieval Iceland,” examines the thorny problem of arriving at a definition of the *exemplum* in a medieval Icelandic context, before proceeding to take up the matter raised in his title. In “Performing Gender in the Icelandic Ballads,” Paul Acker considers whether that (putatively) originally medieval genre can be regarded as a kind of “women’s poetry.”

The final three selections are *sui generis* as far as this volume is concerned, although not in and of themselves. Joseph Harris advances the state of the runological art in “The Rök Inscription, Line 20.” Sarah Harlan-Haughey’s “A Landscape of Conflict: Three Stories of the Faroe Conversions” adds to emerging bodies of scholarship on Old Norse literature from eco-critical and post-colonial perspectives. Rounding out the volume, Kirsten Wolf’s lexical study of “Non-Basic Color Terms in Old Norse-Icelandic” will likely be the definitive reference on its subject for years to come.

A few words on technical matters should also prove useful: In view of the “double life” of *New Norse Studies* both in print and now online, individual bibliographies have been appended to each essay with an eye toward their independent electronic circulation. Full citations are provided in the footnotes as well as in the appended bibliographies in order to allow the digital medievalist to avoid what might ironically be considered excessive “scrolling.” Medieval and ancient primary texts of known (or attributed) authorship are listed by author, anonymous works by title, translations of anonymous works by translator, and anthologies and compilations by their editors’ names. A formal division between primary and secondary sources has been adopted only when the tally of the former is prodigious. As is customary, Icelandic personal names are listed alphabetically

by given name rather than by patronym. As editor, I have striven for the greatest possible uniformity except when this would have been indistinguishable from a lapse into pedantry. The contributors have thus been given leeway regarding certain perennial scholarly bugbears, such as the decision whether or not to anglicize foreign names, or whether to normalize or modernize the orthography of texts cited. With the interest of the broadest possible audience in mind, the authors have been encouraged to cite from published translations when these are suitable for their purposes. In lieu of an index, the reader can search the electronic edition of this volume on the webpage of the *Islandica* series (<http://cip.cornell.edu/Islandica>) for any name or term; it is hoped that the absence of the former will be more than made up for by the increased functionality of the latter.

For his invaluable assistance with various aspects of this volume, I would like to thank Ellert Þór Jóhannsson of the University of Copenhagen. For her cold counsel on all things Faroese, I am grateful to Randi Ward. Patrick J. Stevens, present curator of the Fiske Icelandic Collection, has my heartfelt thanks for matters too myriad to mention, but foremost for his graciousness and patience, both on full display when fielding queries from afar that were best answered by delving into the irreplaceable collection whose untiring steward he is. Finally, I would like to thank the assembled contributors for their persistent faith in a project that has accompanied its editor to more postal codes and across more time zones than he could ever have foreseen.

J.T.

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