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The Elder Edda Revisited: Past and Present Performances of the Icelandic Eddic Poems

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF THEATRE

THE *ELDER EDDA* REVISITED:

PAST AND PRESENT PERFORMANCES OF THE ICELANDIC EDDIC POEMS

By

EVA NIELSEN

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School of Theatre
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	iv
Abstract	v
INTRODUCTION	1
1. EDDIC POETRY IN MEDIEVAL ICELAND: READING OR PERFORMING?	8
2. APPROPRIATION, CODIFICATION, AND THE FINAL PRODUCT: CHRISTIAN INFLUENCES ON THE <i>ELDER EDDA</i> IN EARLY MEDIEVAL PERFORMANCES	20
3. STAGING THE MYTHOLOGICAL <i>ELDER EDDA</i> : CONCEPTUALIZING A CONTEMPORARY THEATRICAL PRODUCTION	36
CONCLUSION	54
APPENDIX A	58
WORKS CITED	60
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH	65

LIST OF FIGURES

1.1	Petroglyph from Gåshoppen: Stone Age	9
1.2	Petroglyph from Ammtmansnes, Finnmark: Stone Age	9
1.3	Petroglyph from Tuvene, Tanum, Bohuslän	10
1.4	Petroglyph from Varlös, Tanum, Bohuslän	10
1.5	Petroglyph from Fossum, Tanum, Bohuslän	10
1.6	Stone engraving from The Kivik grave, Skåne	10
2.1	Map of Scandinavia	28
2.2.	Dritvik, Iceland	29
2.3	Dettifoss, Iceland	29
2.4	View from the top of Mt. Helgafell, Iceland	31
2.5	Recreation of a <i>hof</i>	32
3.1	Greenwood and Luebke (Sun Ergos) in their production of <i>Thor's Hammer</i>	40
3.2	Arnarson and Eggerz in The Possible Theatre's <i>The Prophecy</i>	41
3.3	Sequentia's Gaver with a reconstructed four-string fiddle	46

ABSTRACT

The historical, national, and academic values of the Icelandic Eddic poems—or *Elder Edda*—have received much scholarly attention in the past. Yet, there is another aspect of these poems that deserves more exploration and consideration: that of their theatrical history.

In this thesis, I argue that the Eddic poems were used in some type of dramatic performances in the early Middle Ages. My main criteria include the inherent dramatic dialogue of the poems as well as the suggested performer-audience relationships that lie within. While conducting an investigation of some basic medieval performance theories, including modes and places of performance, I will also examine the coexistence of the, relatively pagan, mythological Eddic poems and Christianity—which was introduced to the Icelanders at the turn of the eleventh century. Finally, I will utilize the abovementioned research and develop a contemporary production proposal of my own. In doing so, I will be drawing upon historical context, not in the interests of constructing a historically accurate production but to provide insight into the cultural context from which the poems emerged.

Essentially, I argue that the *Elder Edda* holds a prominent place in theatre history, and this thesis will highlight the poems' past and present contributions to the field.

INTRODUCTION

THE *ELDER EDDA* REVISITED:

PAST AND PRESENT PERFORMANCES OF THE ICELANDIC EDDIC POEMS

In the small extant corpus of Anglo-Saxon poetry, there is nothing as good as the best poems in the *Elder Edda*

— *W.H. Auden* (quoted in Taylor 226).

The Icelandic Eddic poems are the most ancient documented Scandinavian literature. The majority of these poems revolve around Nordic gods, kings, dwarfs, and giants and many of them may have been several hundred years old when they were finally compiled and recorded on leaves by an unknown scribe in 1270 (Terry xvi).¹ The Icelandic Eddic poems, also referred to as the *Poetic* or *Elder Edda*, serve as a cornerstone of Icelandic identity. Not only are they of excellent literary quality but they also provide “a rare treasure to sources about a stateless society” (Karlsson 2). Consequently, the poems serve as a major attraction at Reykjavik’s renowned Árni Magnússon Institute, are taught in schools nationwide, and have been translated into many foreign languages, especially during the twentieth century. As Lee M. Hollander, renowned poet and philologist, notes “What the *Veda* are for India, and the Homeric poems for the Greek world, that the *Elder Edda* signifies for the Teutonic race: it is a repository, in poetic form, of their mythology and much of their heroic lore [...]” (*The Poetic Edda* ix). Clearly, their significance and popularity are inarguable.

Although I consider the historical, national, and academic value of the poems to be of

¹ This collection of the *Elder Edda* is also known as the *Codex Regius*. Nothing is known of its history until 1643, when it came into the possession of Brynjólfur Sveinsson, Bishop of Skálholt (*Lademanns Leksikon* 112). The Bishop bestowed the *Codex Regius* to King Frederik III of Denmark, who was a great admirer of the poems. After Frederik’s death in 1670, the collection was donated to the Royal Library in Copenhagen, Denmark. However, when Iceland restored its independence in 1944, it pressured Denmark to return the *Codex Regius*. Eventually the collection was restored to the Icelandic people in 1971. The significance of this event is emphasized by many; for instance, Carolyne Larrington writes that “the manuscript traveled back on ship with a military escort, to be welcomed by crowds and public acclaim at the Reykjavik docks” (*The Poetic Edda* xii).

great importance, I believe that there is another aspect of them that deserve more exploration and consideration, that of their theatrical history. In regards to the Eddic poems, this field of study is almost non-existent. Indeed, theories towards the poems' role in theatre history are both undeveloped and ambiguous. What first struck me when I started my research on the *Elder Edda* is that, during the past four decades, several theatre practitioners have experimented with presentations of some of the poems and demonstrated that they can be highly effective in dramatic performance.² Granted, this does not serve as evidence of performances during the thirteenth century, but it does indicate the poems' innate performability. This potential raised questions for me that have resulted in this project.

In my thesis, I will first argue that the poems were performed in the early Middle Ages and, based on this theory, I will examine possibilities in performance modes and audience reception. In order to establish my case, I will first have to prove that the Eddic poems were used in some type of dramatic performances, and, therein, the manner in which they were presented to the Icelanders of the early middle ages. Once I have posited some basic medieval performance theories, I will delve into a contemporary production concept of my own. Essentially, I argue that the Eddic poems hold a prominent place in theatre history, and this thesis will highlight their past and present contributions to the field. Through focusing on the Eddic poems, I aim to secure my ultimate goal to showcase Iceland's significance in world theatre history.

Review of Literature

Prior to the first quarter of the 20th century, scholarly works on the *Elder Edda* have focused on the mythological subject matter and how/where the poems arose as well as variations in meters. Sophus Bugge (1833-1907), noted Norwegian professor of philology, was an active writer in this field, and his various books set the standard for research into the poems.³ Because he limits his discussion to the literary and cultural value of the poems, no references to

² Performances include: *Lokasenna* at Hamrahlíð College in Reykjavík (1979 & 1986), *Ragnarök* in York Minster (1988); *Skírnismál* at the University of Iceland (1992); *Lokasenna* at an outdoor performance in Reykjavík (1993); a performance by the German musical ensemble, Sequentia, entitled *Edda: Viking Tales of Revenge, Lust and Family Values* (2001); The Possible Theatre's *The Prophecy* (2003); Sun Ergos' *Thor's Hammer* (Canada, 2002); and Ålleberg High School's production of *The Lay of Thrym* (Sweden, 2001).

³ Bugge's most popular work is *Home of the Eddic Poems* (1899).

possibilities in recitals or performances were made. Even today, many scholars view the Eddic poems from a reader's perspective and consider them to be mere examples of ancient mythological poetry. Then, in the first quarter of the twentieth century, the first critiques of Bugge's beliefs were published. Bertha Phillpott, in *Edda and Saga* (1920), appears to be the first scholar who argued that the poems were used in some kind of dramatic performance. Phillpott was apparently influenced by Sir George Frazier's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1890). Frazier's work focuses heavily on the relationship between myth and ritual, and Phillpott suggests that the latter may serve as the basis for oral performances of the Eddic poems. Phillpott's observations were supported by H. Munro and N. Kershaw Chadwick in a work entitled *The Growth of Literature* (1935-1940). Although these works were full of potential to instigate a significant change in the field of *Edda* Studies, they did not seem to influence critics over the nearly fifty years that followed. For instance, scholars such as the renowned Einar Olafur Sveinsson have largely avoided any references to the concept of dramatic performances in relation to the Eddic poems. It was not until the late 1980s that other scholars began to consider Phillpott's and the Chadwicks' research, and since then, a more balanced debate has emerged.

Some of the more recent scholarly studies include Patricia Terry's *Poems of the Elder Edda* (1990), Terry Gunnell's *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (1995), and Hilda Ellis Davidson's *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions* (1988). In addition to providing a useful translation of the Eddic poems, Terry's work has helped me understand the various strophic forms. Furthermore, her emphasis on the poems' lyrical elements initiated further research into the relationship between poetry and music and has shaped my performance theories significantly. On a slightly different note, Gunnell's work has provided me with insight into ancient Scandinavian rituals and even points to elements in these rituals that are applicable to the Eddic poems. As a result, not only will I occasionally refer to Gunnell's observations, but they will serve as the starting point to my thesis. Finally, Davidson has brought forth some intriguing observations on present Icelandic belief system and thereby aided me in my understanding of the country's various systems of faith, both of Christian and pagan descent. In short, Terry's, Gunnell's, and Davidson's respective works, among others, have guided my research and added foundation to my performance theories as well as my understanding of Icelandic history as a whole.

I believe that there is enough existing evidence to suggest that the Icelandic Eddic poems were rooted in semi-dramatic traditions. However, my argument goes beyond merely establishing this theory. Although more scholars have started to consider the likelihood of the poems' performance history, I feel that an intensive analysis of their performance elements is missing from this field of study. In fact, theories in regards to exact modes of performance are literally non-existent. As a result, I will not merely assert that the poems were performed during the early middle ages but examine possibilities in performance modes and audience impact. An exploration of early medieval and contemporary performances will highlight the cultural and historical significance of the *Elder Edda*.

Description of Project and Methodology

My thesis will consist of a twofold investigation. First, through intensive examination of recent scholarly works and of selected Eddic poems, I will conclude that the poems were performed in the early middle ages. When analyzing the poems, I will refer to their original language (Old Norse) as well as the English translation.⁴ Furthermore, part of this investigation will include a look into Andreas Heusler's theories on lyrical structure, in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of how exactly the poems would have been performed.

Scholars have neglected to mention the existence of staged drama taking place in Scandinavia during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; however, this is mainly due to the fact that drama appears not to have been regarded as a separate art form, but rather as one aspect of other activities (Gunnell 1-2). For instance, dramatic performances in ancient Scandinavia is not referred to as "drama" but falls into the category of "games," "play," or, in Icelandic, "*leikr*." These "games" involve everything from pagan ritualistic acts, which include animal and harvest sacrifices as well as communal feasts, to actual games such as horse racing (Davidson 36-37). Therefore, when examining any type of ancient theatrical performance, we need to put aside our preconditioned assumptions of "traditional" dramatic text, acting, and audience-interaction. I will therefore base my definition of drama on the mere presence of performers, audiences, and staging areas. Since each poem is unique, I find it necessary to focus on specific poems. For this

⁴ For this purpose, I will refer to Patricia Terry's translation (1990). Although Carolyn Larrington has updated the vocabulary in her translation (1999), and does an excellent job at clarifying some of the subject matter, Terry's handling of the poetry appears more accurate.

purpose I have chosen: *The Insolence of Loki (Lokasenna)*, *The Lay of Skírnir (Skírnismál)*, and *The Lay of Vafthrúthnir (Vafðrúðnismál)*.

Other parts of my thesis will involve more subjective interpretation. When posing performance theories and conjectures about performance spaces, I will keep in mind Dr. Margaret Clunies Ross' works *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society* (1994) and *Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 42: Old Icelandic Literature and Society* (2000). Ross' objective and insightful handling of research relating to Old Norse myths and societies have had a significant impact on my scholarly approach. Ross states that "we must be clear about the limitations under which we work. Whatever we say is not only influenced by the dominant ideologies of our own age but by the nature of the sources at our disposal," indicating that when revisiting ancient cultures, any form of accuracy is difficult to come by (*Prolonged Echoes* 20). Ross' approach resonates in Colin Turnbull's theory of the fieldworker (i.e. scholar) as a spectator (75-76). Basically, Turnbull argues that the scholarly fieldworker cannot be *objective* when reporting on cultural performances—especially when reporting on cultures that are different from one's own. Thus, any scholar who attempts to delve into early cultures, whether it is ancient Greece or, in this case, early medieval Scandinavia is at an obvious disadvantage. Not only because of the major lapse in time, but also due to the lack of resources that would be needed to achieve accurate accounts of both ancient and medieval Scandinavia. Although I will attempt to provide some insight into the world of ancient and medieval Scandinavia, it is not possible to fully understand what it was like to be ingrained in this culture.

It should also be noted that the *Elder Edda* was not recorded until 1270, after the introduction of Christianity. It is likely that the scribes who took upon the task to record these myths brought their own belief systems into the transcribing. In short, it would be ignorant to assume that the poems did not undergo several stages of alterations, depending on the scribe at hand. Therefore, whenever I find myself emerged in some type of subjective analysis, I will keep in mind that I am merely a "spectator." All I can do is investigate and draw reasonable conjectures based on my research.

My approach for chapter three is both one of utilizing research from the two previous chapters and investigating contemporary productions of the Eddic poems. Based on these observations, I will piece together a production concept of my own and thereby illuminate the theatrical elements of the poems and emphasize their belonging in the field of theatre.

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter One: Eddic poetry in Medieval Iceland: Reading, Reciting, or Performing?

The first chapter will serve as the foundation for my thesis, since this is where I set out to prove that the poems were performed in the early middle ages. I will have to rely on recent scholarly works as I weed through various theories and attempt to piece together one of my own. By examining the subject matter and meters of selected Eddic poems, I will argue that the Eddic poems are likely to have been used in some type of dramatic performances in the early Middle Ages. Throughout this examination, I will analyze the poems themselves, referring to both their original language (Old Norse) and the English translations.⁵ My main criteria will include the dramatic dialogue inherent in the poems, resulting from structure, action and emotion, as well as the suggested performer-audience relationship that lies within. Furthermore, I will draw on Andrew Heusler's theories on lyrical structure and consider how musical performances are most likely to have been the mode of performance.

Before I delve into these criteria and examination of the Eddic poems, I will invoke some archaeological evidence that demonstrates that elementary dramatic activities must have taken place in pagan ritual in Scandinavia as far back as the Bronze Age. Furthermore, the similarities between these ancient rituals and the mythological subject matter of the Eddic poems will also be addressed.

Chapter Two: Appropriation, Codification, and the Final Product:

Christian Influences and their Effects on the *Elder Edda* amidst Early Medieval Performances

In this chapter, I will draw on the conclusion that the Eddic poems *were* performed during the early Middle Ages. I will take my observations one step further and pose some theories towards medieval performance spaces, including outdoor settings and sacred temples known as *hofs*. Conjectures towards who these medieval performers and audiences might have been will also be addressed.

In addition to examining the possible modes and places of performance, I will look at

⁵ For this purpose, I will refer to Patricia Terry's translation

how the introduction of Christianity was likely to have affected performances of the poems. If the Eddic poems were indeed used as dramatic performance pieces simultaneously with the introduction of Christianity, one might posit that the mythological and pagan belief systems in Iceland either challenged those of Christianity or that the Christians found ways to alter the poems to fit their own beliefs.

Chapter Three: Staging the Mythological *Elder Edda*: Conceptualizing a Contemporary Theatrical Production

In chapter three, I will conceptualize a contemporary performance of the Eddic poems and thereby illuminate the theatrical elements of the poems and emphasize their belonging in the field of theatre. In doing so, I will be drawing upon historical context, not in the interests of constructing a historically accurate production but to provide insight into the cultural context from which the poems emerged. As I piece together a production concept of my own, I will utilize my research from the two previous chapters as well as investigate other contemporary productions of the Eddic poems. Furthermore, I will draw some reasonable conjectures about scenic, lighting, and costume designs—all of which will be employed as I delve into a production outline at the end of the chapter. Moreover, as explained above, I will not ignore that the knowledge and expectations of today's audiences differ significantly from those of the Middle Ages. Ultimately, I hope that my production proposal will present theatre artists with a valuable and constructive way to approach the Eddic poems in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

The Eddic poems were not only meant for reading in the early middle ages, just like they should not merely succumb to this status in the 21st century. I hope that theatre practitioners will continue to breathe life into these legendary tales and stage productions of the *Elder Edda* all around the world. These explorations will not only present audiences with a new musical genre; they will also provide insight into the mythological beliefs and cultural practices of ancient and medieval Iceland.

CHAPTER ONE

EDDIC POETRY IN MEDIEVAL ICELAND: READING OR PERFORMING?

Proving that the Icelandic Eddic poems were performed during the early Middle Ages may seem to be a difficult task. First, we have no documentation of these performances and, second, their recognized literary merit has overshadowed recognition of a performance context. Yet, the number of theatre artists over the past twenty years who recognize the performative elements of some of the poems is significant. Furthermore, a variety of scholarly work—including Terry Gunnell’s *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (1995), Joseph Harris’ “Eddic Poetry as Oral Poetry” (1983), and Stephen Mitchell’s “Reconstructing Old Norse Tradition” (2003)—note these elements as well. Not only do their various theories suggest that the poems are suitable for contemporary performances, but they also pose an intriguing question: What is it about these poems that make them effective in performance and, more importantly, who is to say that they could not have been performed during the early middle ages? As I demonstrate in this chapter, these poems, or at least a large group of them, are inherently theatrical. The subject matter is engaging and, even more so, the dialogue is both direct and dramatic.

Before I delve into an examination of selected Eddic poems, I find it helpful to revisit ancient Scandinavia. In doing so, I will bring forth some archaeological evidence that demonstrates that elementary dramatic activities must have taken place in pagan ritual in Scandinavia as far back as the Bronze Age.⁶ Furthermore, I find it significant that some of the ancient ritualistic elements are traceable in the Eddic poems as well. In essence, a return to ancient Scandinavia will lay the foundation for the remainder of my arguments in this chapter.

In *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*, Terry Gunnell sheds light on Scandinavian paganism and its ancient roots. This evidence is provided through the images of petroglyphs as

⁶ The first people who settled in Iceland were Norwegians, who brought with them these ancient customs and pagan belief systems.

well as stone engravings, both of which may serve as verification for ancient ritualistic performances. One of these intriguing petroglyphs depicts figures in what has been interpreted as bird masks (fig. 1.1) and another a horned god who appears to be performing a type of animal sacrifice (fig. 1.2).⁷ These specific petroglyphs were discovered in northern Norway, although others have been found in southwestern Sweden as well. All of them are assumed to stem from the Stone Age. However, due to their simplicity, several interpretations can be drawn regarding the exact behavior of the characters. For instance, the relationships between the characters in figure 1 as well as their actions are not as clear as those found in Bohuslän (fig.1.3-5).

According to Gunnell, the interaction between these figures seems more involved and is thought to deal with elements of death, resurrection, and *hieros gamos* (“sacred marriage”) (45). Also, motifs from the Kivik grave tablets (ca. 1200 B.C.) show signs of ritualistic behavior. One depicts four figures that appear to be dancing (fig.1.6), and underneath them, eight figures stand on either side of what seems to be a big cauldron, which is likely to have been used in pagan rituals (Gunnell 48). In fact, large cauldrons have been found in several Nordic graves (Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe* 44). According to Hilda Ellis Davidson, a renowned scholar of pre-Christian Scandinavian and Germanic religion, eating and drinking played a major role in pagan Scandinavian rituals, which further explains why drinking vessels and remains of food have been found in the above mentioned graves as well (41).

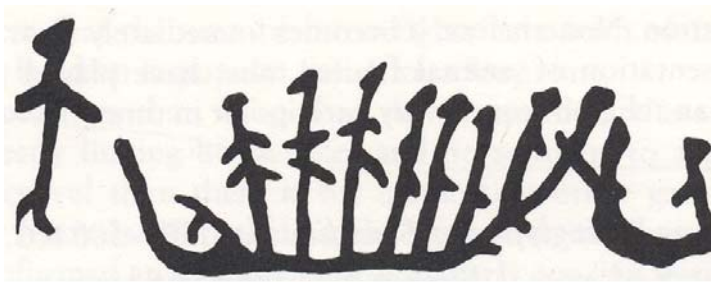


Fig. 1.1 Petroglyph from Gåshoppen, Stone Age (Oslo: Norwegian UP, 1986). 208.



Fig 1.2 Petroglyph from Ammtmansnes, Finnmark: Stone Age (Oslo: Norwegian UP, 1986). 208.

⁷ For more information on the interpretation of these relatively ambiguous bird masks, see ‘The Magic Picture’ in *Words and Objects* (1986) by Poul Simonsen.

It is interesting that most of the mythological Eddic poems emphasize drinking among the gods and, moreover, that some of them specifically mention the cauldron. For instance, in *The Insolence of Loki (Lokasenna)*, the gods use it to brew their traditional mead (ale) and in *Hymir's Poem (Hymisqviða)* the cauldron takes center stage as Thor embarks on a quest to find one for the gods' feast. Conceivably the most dramatic engraving is found on one of the Bohuslän petroglyphs, which appears to depict a battlefield (fig 1.4). Gunnell's observation on the depicted female bird figures is particularly noteworthy: "the idea of female bird figures playing a role in a funeral procession raises logical associations with the image of the

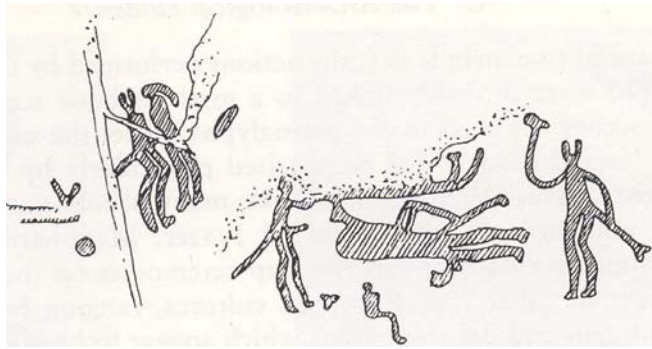


Fig. 1.3 Petroglyph from Tuvne, Tanum, Bohuslän (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer Inc, 1995). 46.

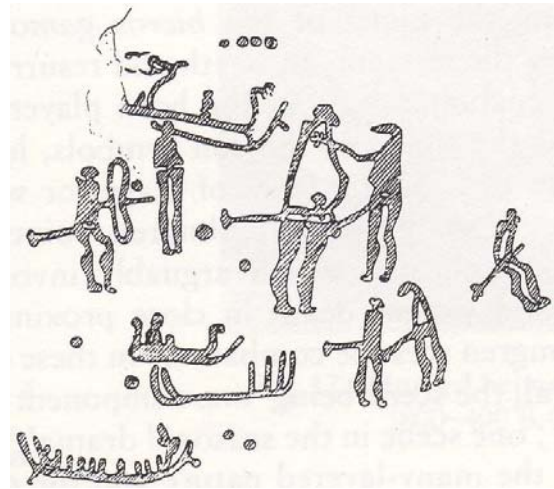


Fig. 1.4 The *hieros gamos*? Petroglyph from Varlös, Tanum, Bohuslän (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer Inc, 1995).



Fig. 1.5 Ritual drama? Petroglyph from Fossum, Tanum, Bohuslän (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer Inc, 1995). 47.



Fig. 1.6 Stone engraving from The Kivik grave, Skåne (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, Inc. 1995). 48.

valkyrjur [valkyries]⁸ who in later times were said to collect spirits of dead warriors and wear swan-skins which could be removed at will” (Gunnell 47). These valkyries also appear in the poems *The Seeress’s Prophecy* (*Voluspá*), *Grimnir’s Sayings* (*Grímnismál*), *The Lay of Volund* (*Volundarkviða*), *The Poem of Helgi Hiorvardsson* (*Helgaqviða Hjorvarðssonar*), both poems of *Helgi Hundingsbani* (*Helgaqviða Hundingsbana I & II*), *The Lay of Sigdrífa* (*Sigrdrífumál*), and *Brynhild’s Ride to Hell* (*Helreið Brynhildar*). However, the bird-like figures could also be interpreted as Swan-maidens—beings that are common in Scandinavian folklore as well—that likewise, play an integral part in *The Lay of Volund*.⁹ Undoubtedly, birds held a prominent role in both ancient Scandinavian rituals and mythology, as this following account from Davidson’s chapter “The Rites on Battle” points out:

Understanding of the speech of birds could give the hero entry into the world of ravens and valkyries, where defeat or victory were ordained, or in more everyday terms it could mean an ability to interpret calls and movements of birds and thereby receive warning of future events. (86-87)

In relation, not only do some of the Eddic poems refer to and depict valkyries and swan-maidens, but one particular poem, *Hrafnsmál*, deals specifically with the dialogue between a raven and a valkyrie. Also, Odin would occasionally travel in the shape of a bird, which is in fact depicted in the poem *Vafthrudnir’s Sayings* (*Vafðrúðnismál*). Therefore, images of the birds, the valkyries/swan-maidens, and the cauldron suggest that some of the Eddic poems must have evolved from the traditions of these pagan Scandinavian rituals as they have been interpreted from the petroglyphs and the Kivik grave tablets motifs. Moreover, Clunies Ross notes that some of the myths that are depicted on these ancient stones may have been “recited as parts of funeral rituals when people were buried in boat graves” (*Prolonged Echoes I* 13).¹⁰ Essentially, although we have no accurate account hereof, the potential relationship between Scandinavian rituals and myths—particularly in relation to similarities in subject matter—is fascinating and cannot be ignored.

⁸ Valkyries are usually represented as beautiful, fair skinned women who welcome the deceased heroes with horns of mead (beer) to the afterlife. The name in Old Norse, *valkyrja*, means literally, “chooser of the slain” (Dronke, *Myth and Fiction in Early Norse Lands* 113).

⁹ Often confused with valkyries, swan-maidens have the ability to transform themselves into birds (Larrington xvii).

¹⁰ Ritual burials of people in boats or ships were common, especially in Norway and Sweden (Foote 238).

Of course, recognizing the link in subject matter does not necessarily prove that the Eddic poems were performed during the early middle ages. In order to gain sufficient evidence to support Phillpott's and the Chadwicks' theories of performance, I will now begin my examination of the poems, emphasizing the dramatic nature of the texts. Essentially, there are two distinct groups of Eddic poems: heroic and mythological. They vary significantly in their mood and context, and recurring themes include courage, strength, loyalty, and wisdom. Furthermore, their range is impressive; tragedy, comedy, satire, and didactic verse--all of these genres are found in the poems. However, despite this noteworthy range, I do not consider the Eddic poems to be overly complex. The stories are easy to follow, even for individuals who only have a limited knowledge of the Old Norse Cosmos.

The poems of the *Elder Edda* have been classified according to their differences in meter, style, and subject matter. All of the poems rely on the use of alliteration.¹¹ Yet, the differences between the two main meters that are used in the poems need to be addressed. These meters are known as *ljóðaháttir* ("song-meter," used for wisdom or dialogue poetry) and *fornyrðislag* ("the old rules," most frequently used in the heroic poems).¹² The latter, which is the oldest form of poetic meter, consists of two half-lines linked by words that alliterate in each half-line.¹³ As seen in *The Seeress's Prophecy*, II

I remember giants of ages past ¹⁴	Eg man jötna ár um borna,
Those who called me one of their kin;	þá er forðum mig fædda höfðu.
I know how nine roots form nine worlds	Níu man eg heima, níu íviði,
Under the earth where the Ash Tree rises. (Terry 1)	mjötvið mæran fyr mold neðan.

(*Völuspá* Stanza 2)

As seen above, the *fornyrðislag* is narrative by nature. In addition, many of the *fornyrðislag* poems, including some of the verses in *The Seeress's Prophecy*, are written in the past tense and, therefore, lack direct speech and dramatic dialogue. Indeed, in style and language, they resemble epic poetry (Haymes 49). For that reason, it is the other meter, *ljóðaháttir*, which I will focus on. Coincidentally, the majorities of the poems in this particular meter are mythological (and deal

¹¹ Pairs of words with the same initial sound alliterate, like "wild and wooly."

¹² There are two variations on these main meters, *málaháttir* ("speech meter") and *kviðuháttir* ("incantation meter"). Since none of the Eddic poems are written entirely in either, they will not receive much focus in this thesis. For instance, the *málaháttir* meter is only occasionally used in "*The Lay of Atli*" (*Atlakviða*) and "*The Greenland Lay of Atli*" (*Atlamál in groenlenzco*).

¹³ This is essentially the same meter as that of *Beowulf*.

¹⁴ When printing Old Icelandic verse, it is customary to leave a gap between the two half-lines (Auden 17).

with the gods of the Old Norse cosmos) rather than heroic; a fact that will be addressed further once I delve into an analysis of reception theory in chapter two of my thesis.

Rather than consisting of 8 half-line stanzas, *ljóðaháttir* intersperses half-lines with full lines, as illustrated in *The Insolence of Loki*:

Loki said:

‘Hush thee, Ithun: of all women
Thou art most mad for men:
you have locked your arms in love
around your brother's bane.’ (Terry 75)

Loki kvað:

Þegi þú, Iðunn, þik kveð ek allra kvenna
vergiarnasta vera,
sitztu armaþ, ína lagðir itrþvegna
um þinn bróðurbana. (Nielsby Stanza 17)

Although the character names, indicating who is speaking, are likely to have been added in by the scribe at hand, it is apparent that what we have here is dialogue. Moreover, the excerpt above, in which Loki speaks directly to Ithun, clearly points to the use of some form of dramatic presentation. Principally, I consider all of the poems written in the *ljóðaháttir* meter to fall into this category.

In order to obtain an accurate examination of the dramatic dialogue, it is necessary to address the nature of the *ljóðaháttir* meter. I find it important to point out that these specific poems are thought to have been written by singers. None of the works I’ve consulted pay much attention to who the driving forces behind the writing or the performing of the poems were; only brief references here and there bother to mention these “pre-Christian composers and singers who had circulated the poems” (Terry xvi). However, as I shall demonstrate, the lyrical nature of the *ljóðaháttir* meter is quite evident—which makes sense considering that the word *ljóð* is likely to have meant “song” or “chant” (Einarsson 43). Consequently, when searching for possible modes of performance, this lyricism cannot be ignored. Andreas Heusler, a musically trained Swiss philologist, elaborated on the lyrical nature of the poems, not merely by attempting to classify the rhythmic patterns, but, more significantly, by pointing out the time element of each line (Hollander xxv-xxvii). Basically, each half-line consists of two to six syllables (four to eight in the full-lines), a fact which prevents any type of structured repetition if they were to be spoken. However, the act of singing allows for the stretching out of syllables and thus, it would have been possible to maintain a consistent structure (by stretching or contracting syllables through singing in order to fit a given stanza). This may also explain why poems of the *ljóðaháttir* meter are less regular than those of the *fornyrðislag* meter, which consistently have

four syllables in each half-line. Indeed, whereas one would be able to grasp the rhythms of the *fornyrðislag* poems merely by *reading* them, this would not be the case with the *ljóðaháttir* poems. In short, only by *listening* to these poems can one fully understand the basic rhythms. Thus, Heusler's idea of sung poetry is noteworthy.¹⁵

Heusler had another theory which taps even deeper into this notion, one that deals with the delivery of this sung poetry. According to Heusler, the fewer syllables, the more emotionally charged the line is. This is accomplished because, when singing a line that is short on syllables, the singer can place more emphasis on variances within each vowel, thus stressing the emotions that lie within. Heusler's theory resonates with Einarsson's note on the irregularities of the *ljóðaháttir* meter: "the patterns of stress are so various and allow the poet such latitude that the meter becomes a perfect instrument for his expression" (42).¹⁶ In order to demonstrate Heusler's syllable/emotion theory more fully, I find it helpful to turn to a few examples from the Eddic poems. In *The Insolence of Loki*, the varying number of syllables within the independent half-lines is quite evident. For instance, when Ithun, fearing for all of the gods' well-being, begs her husband not to enrage Loki any further, she says: "Bið ek, Bragi" ("I beg you, Bragi"). This somewhat emotional line only has four syllables, whereas a more factual line such as "er vit í árdage" ("long ago") has five.¹⁷ Perhaps the most perfect, yet rare, example is seen in the emotional charge of a two syllable half-line from *Hávamál* (*Sayings of the High One*); this line reads "deyr fê" ("cattle die"). Only two syllables would equal high emotion, which makes sense when considering that the subject matter involves death. In essence, the stanzas of the *ljóðaháttir* meter allow for emotional interpretation through vocal expression. Consequently, since these emotions are most effectively expressed by the means of oral delivery, this advances the theory that they were intended for performance. After all, the emotions that evolve out of these stretched out vowels is such a clear indicator that a dramatic effect was intended; an affect that appears pointless if the poems were only to have been read. In short, the idea of sung poetry definitely supports the performance theory. Thus, we may assume that if the poems were indeed performed dramatically, these performances are closest to what we today would refer to as musical acts, a concept that I will return to in chapter two and three of this thesis.

¹⁵ Auden and Taylor bring up a related point, dealing with the fact that Icelandic--like Greek and Latin--is an inflected language (19). Consequently, it seems possible that the intended inflections of the vowels could also be achieved without singing.

¹⁶ However, Einarsson did not specifically state that the poetry was sung.

¹⁷ The last "e" is pronounced in Old Norse.

Upon addressing the lyrical nature of the poems written in the *ljóðaháttir* meter, I will now turn to a few examples of the dialogue and subject matter in *The Insolence of Loki*, *Skirnir's Journey*, and *Vafthrudnir's Sayings*. One of the most noteworthy aspects of the poems is that they all use direct speech in the form of dialogue or monologue. Furthermore, each poem has a clear beginning, middle and end along with a protagonist whose actions we follow.¹⁸ All of them have a sense of urgency, or “quick movement” unlike the “slow movement and Epic breath of the West Germanic epics” (Einarsson 43).

The Insolence of Loki is a *flyting*, which basically means that it contains offensive dialogue. Moreover, the poem is engaging and highly emotional; i.e. the offensive dialogue is a result of the frustration and anger felt by Loki, a giant, who is jealous of the highly praised Fimafeng and therefore murders him. Certainly, Loki does not hesitate using this abusive type of speech. He hurls abuse at one god after another. For instance, Freya is named a “whore” and “foul witch,” Odin is accused of being unfair, and Thor of being a coward. This poem consists of an entourage of godly characters and Loki's confrontation with them. Due to the emotional elements of the dialogue, *The Insolence of Loki* would definitely be more effective in performance than in writing.

Another poem which poignantly illustrates the type of dramatic dialogue that can be found in those of the *ljóðaháttir* meter is *Skirnir's Journey*. The subject matter in *Skirnir's Journey* strongly conveys the Icelanders' devotion to the Old Norse gods. Frey, the god of fertility, peace, and prosperity, has fallen in love with the beautiful Gerd. Frey sends his servant, Skirnir, to retrieve the girl, and Skirnir manages to persuade—or rather threaten—her to give in to his master. One of Skirnir's threats to the reluctant Gerd—which also serves as a great example of the dynamic overtones in this poem—reads:

The giant Hrimgrímnir shall have you for his own,
your husband in Hell;
there among the tree roots wretched slaves
shall give you goatpiss! (Terry 55)

Even though Skirnir, the servant of a god, is a very unsympathetic character (his way of approaching Gerd is very harsh) he still functions as the protagonist and ends up achieving his goal. Thus, we may infer that the Norse mythological figures were not necessarily as well-

¹⁸ Either Odin or Thor is the protagonist in the majority of the *ljóðaháttir* poems.

regarded as they were feared. However, their colorful characteristics would have been entertaining to watch in performance. Another point worth noting is the relationship between Frey's upcoming marriage with Gerd and the earlier mentioned fertility rites, "hieros gamos" ("sacred marriage"). In fact, it is quite possible that this poem was once part of rites connected with a Frey cult, and could have been dramatized during fertility rites (Dronke, *Myth and Fiction in Early Norse Lands* 254).

Based on the dominance of characters and dialogue over plot, *Vafthrudnir's Sayings* may have provided a slightly different performance genre compared to the dramatic *The Insolence of Loki* and *Skirnir's Journey*. In this poem, Odin (the most important of all mythological gods) disguises himself as a bird and travels to visit the giant Vafthrudnir in order to demonstrate his wisdom and superiority, and the dialogue in the poem is basically an oral duel between the two of them; one that sends the loser into the doom of death. After solving Vafthrudnir's riddles, thus proving his wisdom, Odin tests the giant with questions of his own. Basically, the poem is a portrayal of Odin's superceding intelligence; however not as much in wisdom as in trickery. For instance, the riddle that wins him the duel follows:

Odin said:

Far have I traveled, I have tried many things,
Against the gods proved my powers—
What words did Odin whisper to his son [Balder]
When Balder was placed on the pyre? (Terry 44)

Obviously, it would have been impossible for Vafthrudnir to know what Odin whispered to his son. Considering the use of wit in this poem as well as the device of disguise, it may have functioned as a comedic skit. Furthermore, battles (as well as the riddles seen in *Vafthrudnir's Sayings*) between mythological gods and giants were topics that certainly would have appealed to a heathen Scandinavian audience.

Another aspect of the *ljóðaháttir* meter is the occasional use of repetition at the end of the verse. Surely, this use of repetition draws particular attention to the poetry and lyricism of a given poem, as seen in these excerpts from verse 35 and 36 of *Skirnir's Journey*:

I hereby forbid, I deny forever
men to this maiden,
men to make her merry

Nothing else shall you ever drink,
wench, by your own will,
wench, by my will. (Terry 55)

This type of repetition is called “galdralag” (“magic measure”) because it was used for magic purposes; one of which is likely to have been sorcery rituals. The main use of sorcery/black magic in Old Norse mythology was to bring misfortune on another being—as seen in *Skirnir’s Journey* when Skirnir threatens Gerd with “ergi” (“unnaturalness, filth”) unless she submits herself to him (Auden 25).¹⁹ Interestingly, “from descriptions in the [Eddic] sagas we know that the poems used in sorcery rituals were sung” (Einarsson 42-43). Indeed, the connection between singing, poetry, and magical practices is noteworthy, which adds another shred of evidence towards Heusler’s musical theory.

A fascinating, and much debated, element of the majority of the poems written in the *ljóðaháttir* meter are the characteristic prose introductions and closings. Basically, the purpose of these introductions is to provide the listeners with the needed background information on characters and settings. Also, prose segments are interwoven with the poetry in several of the poems; *The Insolence of Loki* and *Skirnir’s Journey* are included in this category. Several conclusions may be drawn from these prose introductions, conclusions, and excerpts. Hollander attributes the prose to the collector of the codex regius compilation, thus insinuating that they were not a part of the original works. He bases his facts on the “independent value” of the prose, inferring that the segments “add nothing, or very little” to the poetry (Hollander xvi). In short, Hollander seems to indicate that the compiler must have felt a need to add pieces of information to clarify the subject matter. However, I find that the prose bits hold a more crucial place in the poems, because—besides being packed with details that certainly make the poems much easier to understand—they seem to be an integral part of the action. In fact, Phillpott believed that the prose parts were “acted [...], even in the rudest pantomimic style” (107). In other words, she compared these prose segments to what we now know as stage directions and believed that the scribe at hand was the one who wrote down this “stage action” when documenting the poems. This theory seems a bit presumptuous, especially when considering that the prose occasionally

¹⁹ Auden and Taylor define *ergi* as a power that enables the practitioner to “bring about unnatural behavior in another, such as cowardice or homosexuality.”

addresses extreme actions that appear impossible to perform. For instance, as seen in the prose epilogue of *The Insolence of Loki*:

Loki hid in the Franang waterfall in the shape of a salmon.²⁰ There the Æsir²¹ captured him. He was bound with the guts of his son Nari. But his son Narfi became a wolf. Skadi took a poisonous snake, and tied it up head downwards over Loki's face. Sigyn, Loki's wife, sat there beside him holding a bowl which caught the venom that dripped down. But when the bowl was full, she had to carry it outside, and meanwhile the venom dripped on Loki. Then he struggled so hard that the whole earth shook, and that is what people now call earthquakes. (Terry 83)

Undoubtedly, Loki's and Nari's transformations as well as the shaking of the earth would have been difficult to present. In short, the prose would have been needed to express situations that would have been difficult, if not impossible, to act out.

In addition to these extensive actions, some of the entries cover events that take place over a long period of time. For instance, the prose excerpt that precedes *Grimnir's Sayings*, tells the story of King Hundir's sons who are lost at sea; in the middle of the night, their ship crashes against land, after which "they went ashore and found a farmer. They stayed with him over the winter" (Terry 46). Likewise, in *The Whetting of Gudrun (Gudrunarhvot)*, part of the prose introduction reads:

When Gudrun had killed Atli she went into the sea, she waded out into the water and wanted to drown herself but she could not sink. She drifted across the fjord to the land of King Ionakr who married her. (Larrington 234)

Surely, it would be a lot easier to narrate those events than acting them out. Lastly, another fact that opposes Phillpott's theory is that some of the prose, especially the parts that precede poems, lacks physical action. For example, prior to the dramatic dialogue in *The Lay of Helgi Hjorvard's Son (Helgaqviða Hjorvarðssonar)*, the poem is introduced with the following passage:

There was a king named Hjorvard. He had four wives. Alfhild was the mother of his son Hedin, Saereid was the mother of Hunding, and Sinrjod the mother of Hymling. King Hjorvard had sworn that he would marry the most beautiful woman he could

²⁰ Loki and his son, Nari, are some of the only gods who are capable of changing shapes.

²¹ I.e. gods.

find [...]. (Terry 104)

Essentially, Phillpotts' "acting theory" is a difficult one to accept. Instead, in regards to the role of the prose, I believe that J. E. Rydquist brought up a reasonable theory. Basically, he claimed that "the prose in these poems might have been based on prologues and epilogues that originally accompanied the dramatic works" (Gunnell 3). Indeed, just because prose and drama are rarely intertwined in what we today perceive as "theatre" does not mean that this could not have been the case in medieval Scandinavia. Surely, there are many ways in which this intertwining could work. For instance, perhaps the poetry parts were performed by singers, while the prose segments were narrated. When taking our musical approach into consideration, this idea of mixing narrated prose with sung poetry appears highly possible.

I find it significant that the prose form only appears in the *ljóðaháttir* poems. It makes sense when considering the nature of *fornyrðislag*. The fact that this meter is inherently narrative explains why the use of prose would have been redundant. Conversely, in the *ljóðaháttir* poems, the added prose appears to have been needed as a way to provide insight for the listener. In short, although the exact role of the prose bits in relation to performance can be interpreted in several ways, I do not believe the narrative nature of the prose parts negates the performable side of the poems.

Upon revealing the dramatic actions and direct dialogue (and the varied emotions that lie within) as well as Heusler's musical/oral theory, I argue that there is sufficient evidence to believe that Bertha Phillpotts and the Chadwicks were correct in their early theories: the Eddic poems—at least those written in the *ljóðaháttir* meter—were performed rather than read.

In addition, why anyone would protest the performances in the first place is puzzling to me. After all, why should the Icelanders' ancient tradition of passing down the poems from generation to generation for centuries—not in writing but orally—have come to an abrupt halt merely because they were recorded in writing? I shall address this question further in my next chapter, as I delve into performance specifics and examine the possible clash between paganism and Christianity.

CHAPTER TWO

APPROPRIATION, CODIFICATION, AND THE FINAL PRODUCT:

CHRISTIAN INFLUENCES ON THE *ELDER EDDA*

IN EARLY MEDIEVAL PERFORMANCES

From Ymir's flesh the earth was made,
and from his blood the sea,
mountains from his bones, trees from his hair,
and from his skull, the sky

Grimnir's Sayings (Larrington 57).

The creation, period of existence, and destruction of the Old Norse cosmos are vividly described and referred to in the mythological Eddic poems. Readers are exposed to an astonishing account of the spaces that make up this ancient world, which include majestic landscapes and noteworthy pagan landmarks. In addition, from the gods to the dwarves and the giants, the mythological beings that inhabit this fascinating world are a colorful group of individuals. Considering these notions, how might the medieval Icelandic performers have attempted to recreate the Old Norse cosmos in a theatrical setting?

As I have demonstrated, a significant amount of evidence suggests that the Eddic poems were performed. In this chapter, I will bring up conjectures as to where these performances took place and who the medieval performers and audiences might have been. Moreover, before I delve into these performance-related elements, I will examine how the Eddic poems were affected by the introduction of Christianity. Considering the relatively pagan subject matter of the Eddic poems, one may wonder how performances of these poems could have continued to exist once Christianity became the official religion in Iceland my main undertakings will be to explain this co-existence between paganism and Christianity in early medieval Iceland.

In the process of doing so, I will provide some crucial context concerning Iceland's cultural and religious history during the transition to Christianity. In turn, this context will illuminate the following discussion of medieval performers and performance spaces. Surely, embarking on an investigation of medieval performance specifics is problematic without gaining some knowledge of Iceland's cultural and religious history.

The most extensive medieval account of Iceland's history, including the topic of Christianization, is undoubtedly Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók* (*Book of the Icelanders*). In this renowned twelfth century work,²² Þorgilsson, also referred to as Ari the Learned, asserts that Iceland was Christianized in 1000, a date which contemporary scholars still agree upon.²³ According to Þorgilsson, it was Norway's King Olaf who demanded the immediate conversion of Iceland. In his account, he states that King Olaf "took captive many influential Icelandic men in Norway, threatening to kill them and invade Iceland if Christianity was not immediately made the religion of the island" ("The Christianization of Scandinavia; 3.2 Ari's Account of Iceland"). However, the fact that this account was written by a *priest* in the *twelfth century*—more than two hundred years after the initial stages of the Christianization of Iceland—demands a certain amount of scrutiny. For instance, Þorgilsson's use of the word "instantaneously"—in relation to the manner in which Iceland was Christianized—is indicative of an underlying religious agenda to establish the superiority of Christianity and its ease in wiping out indigenous religion.

Foremost, it is worth noting that Iceland underwent a different type of Christianizing than the remainder of Scandinavia; one that seems to have been more of a merging of paganism and Christianity than one of total conversion. As Lee M. Hollander, renowned poet and philologist notes, "even when Christianity was finally introduced and adopted as the state religion by legislative decision [...], there was no sudden break, as was more generally the case elsewhere [...]" (*The Poetic Edda* ix). Conceivably, Iceland's location partially explains this theory. For instance, whereas the other Scandinavian countries (Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark) are more geographically united and connected to the European continent, Iceland is significantly isolated from the rest of Europe. In effect, reaching Iceland by boat, even from its neighboring countries (Norway, Denmark, and the British Isles), would take many days (Clunies Ross, *Old Icelandic Literature and Society* 10). According to Hollander, this isolation "rendered

²² Written somewhere between 1120 and 1132.

²³ Although, some argue that it was one year earlier (999).

impracticable for a long time any stricter enforcement of Church discipline in matters of faith and living” (*The Poetic Edda* x). Thus, even though Iceland is said to have adopted Christianity around 1000, the country’s geographical separation from Europe is likely to have impacted the momentum with which the new religion manifested itself in Iceland’s culture. Moreover, in comparison to other European countries, prior to the fourteenth century, the number of clergy members in Iceland was somewhat scarce (Auden 14-15). As Hollander concludes, at a time where the remainder of Europe was more or less fully Christianized, Iceland exhibited an “absence of religious fanaticism.”



Fig. 2.1 Map of Scandinavia. (*WorldAtlas*. May, 2000. <<http://www.worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/Europe/euscan.htm>>).

Granted, I cannot argue against the fact that, even if the process was slower than in other European countries, Iceland *did* adopt Christianity; after all, Protestantism is the major religion in the country today. Consequently, it would appear that Christianity—by the end of the thirteenth century, during the time when the Eddic poems were first recorded—must have been fully integrated and accepted by the Icelandic people. If this is the case, and if the Christians were opposed to any type of pagan worshipping—including possible performances of the Eddic poems—it seems feasible that the church would have disallowed any performances, or readings for that matter, of the *Elder Edda*. Although it was decided by law in 1000 that all Icelanders should be baptized and accept the Christian God, some noteworthy concessions were made—concessions which provided the Icelanders’ with certain leeway to slip mythic elements into their

new, Christian lifestyle. Undoubtedly, the most significant of these concessions is the one that allowed people to practice pagan sacrificial feasts (to their “heathen gods”) “in secret if they so wished” (Karlsson 34).²⁴ As Clunies Ross states, “the mythic process, concerned with explaining the origin and form of the world, did not stop with the conversion to Christianity” (*Prolonged Echoes I* 17). In addition, the strength of this devotion expands beyond the early conversional years. According to Jacqueline Simpson, a renowned American scholar of folklore studies, “long after the Conversion people still believed that ‘the good spirits of the land’ dwelt in groves, mounds or waterfalls, and women still gathered by caves and cairns to eat food first dedicated to them” (180). Furthermore, the famous Danish philologist, Sophus Bugge, even refers to the medieval Icelanders as being “heathen” or “half heathen” (298). In short, there is plenty of evidence that suggests that, long after the spring of Christianity, many Icelanders continued to worship ancient, mythological deities and phenomena. Surely, the pre-conversion popularity of the Eddic poems would have been able to survive amidst this relatively flexible environment.

Even to this day, over a thousand years after the Old Icelandic sagas and Eddic poems were first being passed from generation to generation, the ancient mythological beliefs are still honored by many Icelandic people. For instance, Rolf Soderlind, a journalist for *Reuters*, highlights the Icelanders’ inherent respect for mythological sacred spaces in this August 1999 report:

The trouble started last month when the bulldozers kept breaking down during work on a new road. The mysterious accidents in front of one particular stone brought work to a standstill at the construction site at Ljarskogar, about three hours drive north of Reykjavik. The contractors solved the problem in an unorthodox way but one which is fairly common on Iceland. They accepted an offer from a medium to find out if the land was populated by elves and, if so, were they causing the disruptions.

In effect, a survey by an Icelandic newspaper in 2000 found that 54 percent of the population believe in nature beings, such as elves, fairies and trolls; and 800 accounts of eyewitnesses (i.e. Icelanders who swear that they have seen one of these beings) have been recorded (Lund 69). Along the same lines, a study from the nineteenth century claims that “41 percent of Icelanders report having had contact with the dead,” whereas “the European average was 25 percent, the

²⁴ The Icelanders were also allowed the continued consumption of horse flesh, a practice associated with pagan sacrificial feasts.

Norwegian figure 9 percent,” thus emphasizing an inherent Icelandic belief in supernatural phenomena (Lacy 156). In short, mythological and supernatural belief systems are still a central part of the Icelandic national consciousness. The enduring power of these beliefs strengthens the theory that Christianity was integrated into, rather than actively suppressed, existing pagan practices and beliefs in the medieval period.

Thus, it is evident that pagan and Christian belief systems co-existed in Iceland in the early Middle Ages, and even today. The exact relationship between Christian converts and those Icelanders who maintained their pre-Christian pagan belief, however, is somewhat ambiguous. Some scholars consider the early conversional years as a kind of battlefield between paganism and Christianity, a notion which is also found in the Icelandic saga, *Njal's Saga*, in which a pagan priestess, Steinunn, attempts to convert a German missionary, Thangbrand (Borovsky 7).²⁵ Despite this commonly-held notion of a clash between Christianity and paganism, it is important to understand the Christians' view on the latter. Undoubtedly, keeping in mind the earlier mentioned concessions, the Christian missionaries seem to have been aware that, rather than *substituting* paganism for Christianity, it was more a matter of changing the exact connotation of paganism. For instance, over the course of the succeeding centuries, it does not appear that Old Norse mythology was looked at as an opposition to Christianity, but rather as an element of historical preservation. In order to better understand the logic behind this theory, it is helpful to keep in mind the following notion from Clunies Ross, which explains that “myth is connected with the phenomenon of religious belief, though myth is not the same as religion” (*Prolonged Echoes I* 18). This may explain why the Christians were able to tolerate a continued devotion of a mythological belief system among the Icelanders and why, even though Christianity overtook mythology as the official religion, ancient mythology and pagan worshipping continued to have a place in the Icelandic society. In regards to the relationship between paganism and Christianity, we may therefore conclude that, instead of abolishing all pagan elements from the lifestyles of

[Thangbrand] lectured to him for a long time and tried to convert him to paganism. Thangbrand listened to her in silence, but when she had finished he spoke at length, turning all her own arguments against her. ‘Did you ever hear,’ she asked, ‘how Thor challenged Christ to a duel, and Christ did not dare to accept the challenge?’ ‘I have heard,’ said Thangbrand, ‘that Thor would be nothing but dust and ashes if God did not permit him to live.’ ‘Do you know who wrecked your ship?’ she asked. ‘Who do you think?’ asked Thangbrand. ‘I will tell you,’ she replied: ‘It was Thor's giant-killing hammer That smashed the ocean-striding Bison; It was our gods who drove The bell-ringer's boat ashore. Your Christ could not save This buffalo of the sea from destruction; I do not think your God Kept guard over him at all.’ She added: ‘Thor seized the great ship, Shook its frame And beat its timbers And hurled it on the rocks; That ship will never Sail the seas again, For Thor's relentless thrashing Smashed it into fragments.’

individual Icelanders, the Christians were merely implementing other, more peaceful, conversion methods. Indeed, as Clunies Ross asserts, rather than banning the mythic process “Christianity became one of the impulses combining in such thought” (*Prolonged Echoes* 117).

Undoubtedly, this combining of thoughts, and therein the Christians’ way of viewing Old Norse Mythology from the standpoint of mythological preservation, may also explain why the Eddic poems were recorded around 1270—certainly, this was a time where Christianity must have been fully manifested and where the Christian church was accepted as the nation’s chief religious institution. The Christians’ approval of the Eddic poems becomes even more evident when considering the fact that most scholars claim that the poems were likely to have been recorded by one or more Christian scribes. As Karlsson notes, “practically all written descriptions of pre-Christian religion among Germanic people are written by Christians” (16). Thus, even though the Eddic poems display pre-Christian belief systems, the Christian community must have found a certain amount of value in them. Even more significantly, since the Christians were the ones who recorded the poems, they were also *in charge* of possible alterations. Indeed, the implications of this privilege are important and, ultimately, explain why performances of the Eddic poems would not have posed a threat to Christianity. Since the *Codex Regius* is the first written account of the Eddic poems, specific alterations—by the Christian scribes—remain unidentified; nonetheless, it is possible to draw some reasonable conjectures. In fact, although the subject matter of the Eddic poems evolves around Old Norse mythology and mythological characters, there are certain elements in the poems that appear to have roots in Christianity.

These roots are more evident in some poems than others, but the one that undoubtedly most clearly exhibits examples of these is *The Seeress’s Prophecy* (*Voluspá*), which is undoubtedly the most famous of the Eddic poems. In *The Seeress’s Prophecy*, the seeress (prophetess) gives an extraordinary visual account of the creation of the Old Norse cosmos: the coming of the gods, the giants and the dwarves, and finally the destruction and downfall of this ancient world. According to Bugge:

The giant-fostered seeress in *Voluspá*, who turns her gaze toward the whole human race and meditates upon the fate of the world from its beginning to its destruction and resurrection, has unquestionably Christian prototypes, and shows particular kinship with the Sibyls of the Middle Ages. (xxix)

Although the seeress describes the creation and existence of the Old Norse cosmos, perhaps the element of resurrection was a Christian addition? This does not seem to be a far-fetched idea, especially when considering the Christian notions at the end of the poem. Two of the lines read: “the powerful, mighty one, he who rules over everything, will come from above, to the judgment-place of the gods” (Larrington 12). It is easy to see how this “powerful, mighty” deity could be acknowledged as the Christian God. In addition, the last verse of *The Seeress’ Prophecy*—which explains this vision of resurrection further—reads: “There comes the dark dragon flying [...] in his wings, he carries corpses; now she²⁶ must sink down” (Larrington 13). Again, Bugge points to the Christian idea of dragons killing evil people by tearing up their bodies; a concept that has definite connections to John’s Book of Revelation (xxxv).²⁷ Furthermore, as Elias V. Oiconomou states:²⁸

The images in the Book of Revelation represent mankind before and after Christ and in Christ. The book’s position in the end is that the history of faith is not subject to the historical scheme of “rise and fall;” hence there shall be no post-Christian era, but rather the era of Christian fulfillment in which Christ and the faithful universally triumph. (“Authorities and Citizens in John’s Book of Revelation”)

From this perspective, the Christians could actually use a poem such as *The Seeress Prophecy* to illustrate that the Old Norse cosmos belonged solely to a pre-Christian era; an era that merely existed in order to pave the way for Christianity.

Likewise, Baldr—Odin’s son, who is the most popular and handsome of the gods—exhibits some traits that are comparable to those of Christ. The most remarkable evidence towards their similarities can be found in the account of his death, which is described in two verses of *The Seeress’ Prophecy* as an integral part of the events that lead to the downfall of the Old Norse cosmos. Basically, these verses depict how Baldr is killed with a mistletoe dart by his blind brother, Hod (Larrington xv). Since the mistletoe does not grow in Iceland, this is certainly an element that must have incorporated by foreign settlers; for instance, it grows sporadically in

²⁶ Hollander translates this half-line as “now *he* will sink,” claiming that, although the female noun is used in the *Codex Regius*, the referred object has to be the dragon “who is seen on his usual flight, carrying corpses, but who will sink out of sight in the new order of things” (13). Yet, his comment about other editors, such as Larrington, who prefer to use “she,” makes sense as well; this usage would imply that the seeress, upon completing her prophesy, is about to disappear.

²⁷ Bugge states that this Christian conception was well known in the Middle Ages.

²⁸ This excerpt is from his introductory speech at the International Interdisciplinary Symposium for the celebration of the 1900th anniversary of the book of John's Revelation.

Norway and widespread in England. Bugge believes that the addition of the mistletoe ought to be credited to English Christians chiefly because, in England, “it occupies a prominent position in popular superstition” (Bugge xlv). Even more significantly, it was a common legend among the Christians that the cross of Christ was made from mistletoe (Sullo, “Mistletoe History”). In this context, it is possible to draw some direct parallels between the innocent Baldr and Christ. Dronke even refers to Baldr’s sacrifice as “the theological climax of the poem” (*Myth and Fiction in Early Norse Lands* 121). Another Christianity-related observation has been made about the similarities between Loki, the giant-turned-god, and Lucifer. Loki was the one who tricked Hod into killing Baldr.²⁹ As Bugge notes “as punishment for Baldr’s death, Loki was taken and bound, not to be loosed until the end of the world. This is connected with statements in Christian narrative from the Middle Ages, that Lucifer lies bound forever” (xlvi). In short, implementing small changes, such as the dragon and the mistletoe, is likely to have added a reasonable amount of control and security to the Christians. Bugge concludes that the Christians

transformed [the poems], with the aid of their vivid imaginations, in accordance with special heathen conceptions, so that the new myths thus formed became genuinely national in character. (xxxix)

Although I would not go as far as Bugge and refer to the Eddic poems as complete transformations, the evidence of Christian impact on these Old Norse pagan beliefs cannot be ignored. Moreover, their presence in some of the poems would certainly explain why Christianity and performances of the Eddic poems could have coexisted.

Now that I have provided some contextualization of an early medieval Icelandic society, including the individual and collective influences of Christianity versus mythology, I will draw some conjectures about specific performance elements in relation to the Eddic poems. For the first part of this investigation, I will examine potential staging areas, including outdoor settings and possible permanent structures. In order to get a general concept of how these performances may have been staged, it is helpful to look at how the Old Norse cosmos is depicted in the Eddic

²⁹ Even as Loki by his counsel causes Baldr’s death, so in the Cornish mystery, ‘The Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ,’ Lucifer says that it is he who induced Pilate to slay Our Lord. Lucifer often appears in the Middle Ages as the prince of the devils, and thus corresponds to *Satan Princeps* in the Gospel of Nicodemus. In the redaction of the second part of this gospel, which was known in England, *Satan Princeps* says to Inferus, the ruler of the domain of death: ‘I sharpened the lance that pierced Jesus.’ Similarly, it is Loki who prepares the weapon [mistletoe] that pierces Baldr. (Bugge xlv)

poems as well as in other sources of Icelandic literature.³⁰ Due to the complexity of this cosmos, I will only provide an account of the most noteworthy features.

Foremost, the Old Norse cosmos consists of Utgard (The Outer World), Midgard (The Middle World), and the hall of Asgard.³¹ Circled by the Ocean, all three of these are constituents of what has been described as a “tricentric structure [...] with Asgard in the center, Midgard about it and Utgard as the third ring” (Auden 30). In addition to Asgard, the gods possess other halls as well—most of which are, in fact, mentioned by Grimnir in *Grimnir’s Sayings*.³² These halls, located in Midgard, are all depicted as halls of “brightness, fertile green, and golden treasures” (Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe* 187). Furthermore, the gods also have a kingdom beneath the sea, Ægir, which is where they meet to feast.³³ Besides hosting some of the gods, Midgard is also the world of man. Utgard consists of the lands of giants and the land of elves. The giants live in dark caves and mountain halls, although a certain species—the frost giants—live beneath the face of the earth. Also beneath the earth are the worlds of the dead and the Hall of Hell.³⁴ Finally, circling Asgard and Midgard (and, thus, separating them from Utgard) is a massive Ocean, in which the Midgard-Serpent swims.³⁵ In short, from a geographical standpoint, the Old Norse cosmos consists of some noteworthy, majestic physical structures. In relation to Eddic performances, one also ought to keep in mind the cosmos’ exterior environment, i.e. natural phenomena, such as mountains, caves, valleys, rivers, and waterfalls. Indeed, all of the mythological poems exhibit one or more of these geographical features. Thus, the locales that serve as a setting for the poems certainly reflect the geographical essence of the Old Norse cosmos.

Undoubtedly, it is easy to see how the landscape of Iceland could serve as a backdrop to these performances. The natural phenomena, as described in the poems, are certainly one of the country’s characteristics. Even today, the Iceland’ landscape is known for its elemental rawness

³⁰ Besides the Eddic poems, perhaps the greatest source of these depictions are found in the Old Norse sagas, also known as the Younger Edda. The following review is borrowed from Carolyne Larrington’s introduction in *The Poetic Edda*.

³¹ Where the main tribe of gods, known as the Æsir, belong.

³² Including Trudheim, Yewdale, Sokkvabekk, Gladsheim, Thrymheim, Breidablik, Himinbiorg, Folkvang, and Valhalla.

³³ As seen in *The Insolence of Loki*, among other poems.

³⁴ Davidson describes the world of the dead as a “dismal rocky region where dead giants lay in their rocks and caves, springing up to attack interlopers [...]”

³⁵ According to Auden, the Midgard-Serpent is so huge that “he encircles all Midgard and clasps his tail in his mouth” (30).

which consist of lava fields, icecaps, glaciers, hot pools, lakes, geysers and thundering waterfalls (*Insight Guide: Iceland* 127). Combined with the thick fog that often drapes itself across these features, the landscaping often exudes an appeal of mystery; certainly something that would have added to the atmosphere of an outdoor performance.



Fig. 2.2. Dritvik, Iceland (*Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences*, April, 2005. <<http://www.eas.ualberta.ca>>).



Fig. 2.3. Dettifoss, Iceland. (*Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences*, April, 2005. <<http://www.eas.ualberta.ca>>).

One only has to browse through a few of the mythological Eddic poems in order to discover that, in addition to the dominance of outdoor settings, the variety is quite extensive. In fact, none of them center around one single location. For instance, in *The Lay of Skírnir*, Skírnir travels across wet mountains before reaching the hall of Gerd. Next, upon entering the hall, he speaks to a herdsman who is sitting on a grave-mound. In *The Lay of Vafþrúdnir*, Odin embarks on an extensive journey to Utgard to visit Vafþrúdnir's hall, which thus involves the action of crossing the Ocean.³⁶ In *The Insolence of Loki*, the action begins outside of a mountain hall and concludes near a waterfall. Furthermore, *Harbard's Song* (*Hárbarzljóð*) depicts Thor traveling from "the east" prior to reaching a small fjord (Larrington 69). Thus, a lot of traveling takes place within these poems, hence taking the audience through a scenic journey. This does not necessarily mean that performances of a given poem would require a multitude of settings; after all, whereas today's audiences are accustomed to realism in the theatre, undoubtedly, this was a different case with the medieval Icelanders. Considering that cycle plays in other European countries—as well as theatre in ancient Greece—relied on more symbolic conventions (especially in terms of props), it is more likely that the same kind of representation would have

³⁶ Indeed, the action of gods traveling to challenge giants is depicted in several of the poems.

sufficed for the medieval Icelanders as well. Thus, in terms of staging, it seems probable that one setting (i.e. stock set) could have served as a backdrop and that the sung or spoken lines, combined with entrances and exits, would have been enough to suggest a change from one location to another. Keeping in mind that almost all of the settings in the Eddic poems are found in nature, it is not far-fetched to suggest that outdoor performances would have enhanced and captured the essence of these poems.

Perhaps the Icelanders made use of outdoor open spaces in the same manner as the Greeks. Although the Greeks had designated physical structures for their theatres, their locations for these certainly seems to embrace the surrounding nature. According to Carlson, the Greeks “sought sites that would provide natural areas for spectators” such as “gentle hillside slopes;” furthermore, due to a lack of wealth and labor force, “the Greek theatre [...] was dependent on the natural contours of its site, and therefore was located in various parts of the city and its suburbs” (*Places of Performance* 62). Carlson’s note on this concept of Greek theatres may also apply to those of early medieval Iceland. Moreover, it should not matter if Iceland did not possess any actual physical structures for their theatres because, as is also suggested by Carlson, a theatrical experience does not necessarily require a traditional theatre building (*Places of Performance* 2). Hence, even though there is no existing evidence of any designated medieval performance spaces in Iceland, it is still possible to draw conjectures towards these.

In order to expand on this concept of outdoor performances, i.e. in terms of specific locations, it is perhaps most helpful to keep in mind the connection between the Eddic poems and pagan rituals, as discussed in my previous chapter. In Iceland, certain locations are acknowledged for their “holy” reputation and are therefore referred to as “holy sites.” These sites are all located close to caves, waterfalls, or mounds. Undoubtedly, the most famous of these sites is that of the Helgafell mound.³⁷ Visible from several miles away, Helgafell is “a small natural outcrop of rock, resembling in shape a long burial mound” (Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe* 13-14). According to an article from Iceland’s *Pingeyri*:

The view from Mt. Helgafell is tremendous and in clear weather you can see across the northern part of Dyrafjordur and the western part of the Alps. On the top of Helgafell you find the Altar, an old, moss grown pile of stones [...]” (February 16, 2005).

³⁷ In translation, the Helgafell mound means “Holy Hill” (Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe* 16).



Fig. 2.4 View from the top of Mt. Helgafell, Iceland (*Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences*, April, 2005. < <http://www.eas.ualberta.ca>>).

I find the presence of the altar to be a fascinating addition. Could it perhaps have been that—prior to the introduction of Christianity—a combination of ritual and performance were conducted at the site? And that, after public sacrifices were abolished in the 11th century, holy places such as the Helgafell mound hosted performances of the Eddic poems, due to its symbolic undertones? Granted, these speculations are inconclusive; yet, it seems very possibly that the Icelanders could have put on performances at a space associated with this kind of pagan connotations. Considering the spectacular natural phenomena that surround the place, it would also have provided an exciting and practical backdrop for these performances.

There are no physical remnants of designated “theatre buildings” in Iceland from the medieval period, nonetheless, some information appears significant to me and has brought on some conjectures in terms of indoor Eddic performances. In terms of indoor settings, like those outside, I am mainly interested in examining the structures that may have close associations with pagan rituals. A structure which falls into this category is that of the *hof*. The *hof*, which was a building made of timber, is said to have been used for personal or communal sacrifices and worship, and is therefore referred to as a heathen place of worship. Historical and legendary accounts mention two specific *hofs* in Iceland. One of the best descriptions is found in the *Eyrbyggja Saga* (“The Religious Practices of the Pre-Christian and Viking Age North”):

It was a mighty building. There was a door in the side wall, nearer to one end of it; inside this door stood the posts of the high-seat, and in them were the nails that were called the Divine Nails. The inside was a place of great sanctuary.

Certainly, the size of these *hofs* must have been adequate to accommodate both performers and audiences alike, since another study—that of a *hof* built by an Icelandic settler, Ingmundr—

indicates that the structure is estimated to be one hundred feet long. Moreover, no evidence is able to prove that these buildings were erected purely for religious purposes (Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe* 32). Could it be, perhaps, that these *hofs* also served a gathering place for theatrical performances?

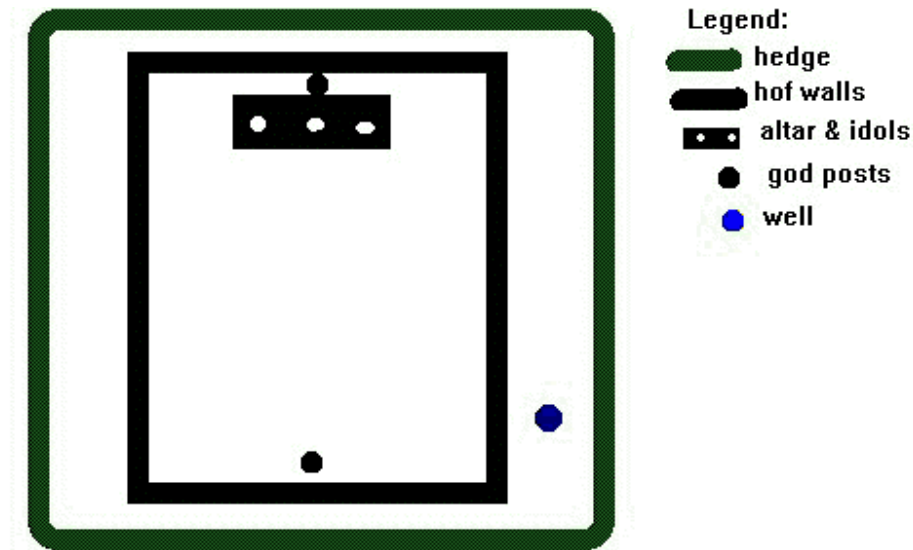


Fig. 2.5. Recreation of a *hof* (“The Hof and other Holy Sites,” *Miercinga Rice*. 2004. <<http://www.ealdriht.org>>).

Another fascinating fact is that, although the term for *hof* is understood to mean “holy stead,” other scholars, such as Hilda Ellis Davidson, argue that the original, more accurate meaning is closer to “farmstead.” Indeed, there is plenty of evidence that suggests that large farmsteads served as a gathering point for people on days of worship. As Davidson notes, “it seems [...] probable that this was the hall of a farmhouse used for communal religious feasts, perhaps that of the leading man of the district who would preside over such gatherings [...]” (*Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe* 32). Although it might sound strange to a contemporary audience, it could very well be that performances of the Eddic poems were taking place not only at these relatively ambiguous *hofs*, but also on farms all over Iceland as a part of communal gatherings. According to renowned theatre historian, Glynne Wickham:

If the contemporary catch phrase ‘total theatre’ has any meaning, it finds a truer expression in medieval than in modern terms of reference; for song, dance [...] disguise, spectacle, jokes, disputation and ritual all figure, separately or compounded, in the drama of the Middle Ages, which was devised in celebration of leisure and for local community.

(*The Medieval Theatre* 4)

At a first glance, this notion of the medieval theatre could be seen as a generalization and, moreover, seem irrelevant to my case since there is no conclusive evidence in regards to Eddic performances. Yet, Wickham's observation seems applicable in relation to the kinds of gatherings, both prior to and after the conversion of Christianity, that are likely to have taken place within these farms. In short, even if there were no theatre "buildings" in medieval Iceland, the concept of "total theatre" explains why theatrical performances could very well have taken place at somebody's farm, i.e. home. Indeed, the notion of these "total theatre" events seems even more plausible when examining who the medieval performers might have been.

Much has been written about the medieval Icelandic court poets, who presented skaldic poetry to foreign courts.³⁸ Like the poems of the *Elder Edda*, skaldic poetry is also composed in alliterative verse, but its form is highly intricate and somewhat artificial. Stephen Mitchell adds "skaldic verse tends toward praise, lamentation, and occasional poetry, but it should be noted that skaldic panegyrics also take up, for example, Christian religious themes" (203-204). Furthermore, the poetic diction associated with skaldic poetry is often classified as stilted, which chiefly results from the extensive use of kennings (Clunies Ross, "Norse-Icelandic Skaldic poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages").³⁹ The Eddic poems, however—especially not the ones belonging to the *ljóðaháttr* meter—do not seem to fall into this category of court entertainment. In retrospect, perhaps whereas the skaldic, more stilted, poems appealed highly to the courts, the everyday language of the mythological poems—and, thereby, dramatic performances of the poems—was geared towards other audiences. If this is true, who would these, relatively more casual, poems might have appealed to?

Paul Acker suggests that the "everyday language [of the mythological/*ljóðaháttr* poems] may imply an audience of Icelandic farmers" (106). Although this notion may seem a bit clear-cut, certainly, the connection between an audience of farmers and the earlier mentioned *hofs*, or "farmsteads," is striking. Furthermore, the majority of common people in medieval Iceland does in fact appear to have been farmers—also known as chieftains—and farmhands and, as is suggested by the medieval musician Benjamin Bagby, these performances could very well have

³⁸ Iceland has never had its own monarchy. As a matter of fact, up until the twentieth century, it was either ruled by Norway or Denmark. Finally, in 1944, Iceland became a Republic and gained total independence.

³⁹ "In literature, a kenning is a compound poetic phrase substituted for the usual name of a person or thing. For example the sea in Old English could be called *segl-rād* 'sail-road,' *Swan-rād* 'swan-road,' *bæp-weg* 'bath-way' or *hwæl-weg* 'whale-way'" (*Wikipedia--The Free Encyclopedia*).

taken place “in the dwelling of a powerful Icelandic chieftain” (13). Acker and Bagby’s theories seem even more appropriate when reviewing a poem such as *Skirnir’s Journey*. As previously explained, it is highly likely that this particular poem used to be acted out during fertility rites, due to its focus on Frey, the god of fertility, peace, and prosperity. Certainly, the pre-Christian farmers, relying on successful harvests, would have wanted to sacrifice to this particular god. In essence, it seems most likely that performances were held at local farms, and that the audiences mainly consisted of these chieftains and possibly their farmhands as well. Whether these groups always performed indoors is inconclusive.

If the audience mainly consisted of farmers and farmhands, does this mean that the performers were farmers as well? According to Bagby, they were undoubtedly not local farmers themselves, but rather professional minstrels, or *leikarar* (13).⁴⁰ Gunnell expands on who these *leikarar* were, particularly by drawing comparisons to the mimes of the Roman Republic. He bases these observations on a saga called *Sverris Saga*, which was written in the late twelfth century by the Icelandic scald Mani. In reference to the *leikarar*, Mani mentions

exaggerated facial expression [...], the note of what might be white make-up of some kind [...], and the suggestion that the performers use trickery (‘gin’), grotesque antics (‘skripa lat’), and satire (‘skaup’). (363)

Likewise, the mime actors in Rome also placed much importance on their facial expressions (61). Whether or not these resemblances are incidental or influential is unknown. Moreover, assuming that the traits of the mimes and the *leikarar* are absolutely identical—merely because of similarities such as emphasized facial expressions—would be presumptuous. Yet, it is interesting to examine what is known about the mime performers and relate these observations to the Eddic poems. I will return to this idea in my next chapter, when I attempt to conceptualize a performance of the *Elder Edda*.

Although there are no extant records of any medieval performances of the Eddic poems, I feel that the evidence I have laid forth in this chapter carries enough substance to suggest otherwise. I do not believe that the introduction of Christianity hindered these performances; on the contrary, preserving them in writing may even have heightened an interest in the poems. Iceland’s natural phenomena could have provided the Icelanders with a variety of potential

⁴⁰ It is easy to notice the resemblance between the singular form for *leikarar*—*leikari*--and the word “play,” *leikr* (see chapter one).

staging areas and, moreover, there is a significant amount of evidence that suggests that performances may have been staged at local farms. Essentially, combined with the poems' performative elements, as described in my previous chapter, I remain convinced that the Eddic poems were performed.

CHAPTER THREE

STAGING THE MYTHOLOGICAL *ELDER EDDA*: CONCEPTUALIZING A CONTEMPORARY THEATRICAL PRODUCTION

Why are you so silent, you arrogant gods,
Are you unable to speak?
Assign a seat and place me at the feast,
Or tell me to go away!

—Loki, *The Insolence of Loki* (quoted in Larrington 86).

Throughout this thesis, my explorations of the *Elder Edda* have frequently touched upon notions of community. These explorations include the communal gatherings among medieval farmers and the Eddic poems' roots in ancient pagan rituals, such as fertility rites. Moreover, the commonly held feasts among the gods—as described in *The Insolence of Loki*—resonate with the depictions on the petroglyphs, as explained in chapter I, which hint towards communal acts of eating and drinking. Since examples of communal bonding abound in medieval and ancient Icelandic culture, it is not surprising that the theme infiltrates the poems of the *Elder Edda*.

In this chapter, I will utilize my research to conceptualize a contemporary performance of the Eddic poems. My concept emphasizes the theme of community and its eventual decline, both in terms of plot and staging. In doing so, I will draw upon historical context, not in the interests of constructing a historically accurate production but to provide insight into the cultural context from which the poems emerged. In order to conceptualize this performance, I will focus on Andrew Heusler's and other contemporary, musical theories when determining the exact mode of presentation. Throughout the process, as I piece together a production proposal of my own, I will refer to other contemporary performances of the Eddic poems. These performances have served as sources of inspiration, especially in regards to guiding my selection of chosen Eddic poems.

Surely, a theatrical production of the Eddic poems would entertain and inspire contemporary as well as medieval audiences. However, whereas the subject matter—the legends and the mythology—of the Eddic poems was common knowledge in medieval Iceland, this is obviously not the case today; particularly in non-Scandinavian countries. Since contemporary productions of the Eddic poems can potentially provide considerable insight into the customs of the medieval Icelanders, especially in relation to their strong emphasis on community, I am defining my hypothetical production as a contemporary non-Scandinavian production of the *Elder Edda*. Ultimately, my goal is to counteract Iceland's marginalized status by illuminating the fascinating relationship between the country's ancient and medieval sense of communal solidarity to the storylines and the characters that are depicted in the Eddic poems.

Production Concept

The Communal Bond: From Stability to Imbalance, Calm to Chaos

Brother will fight brother and be his slayer

Brother and sister will violate the bond of kinship

—*The Seeress's Prophecy* (Larrington 10).

Most of the mythological Eddic poems illustrate the battles between the gods and the giants of the Old Norse cosmos. It is understood that if the giants ever triumph over the gods, chaos and evil will destroy the latter group and, ultimately, lead to the downfall of the cosmos. One of the reasons that the gods have continued to outdo the giants is undoubtedly due to the strong bond that they share among themselves. No hatred exists between them but, rather, they always seem to be supporting one another. Yet, the actions of one god, Loki, seems to have spurred a breakdown of the communal spirit and slowly poisoned the, previously, strong bond among the gods. The deterioration of this bond enabled the giants to take on the gods as a collective.

The events that are depicted in *The Insolence of Loki* appear to be the first in a series that upset this communal spirit—events that could have been avoided had it not been for Loki's actions. The opening prose bit of the poem is an account of Loki murdering Ægir's servant, Firmafeng, out of jealousy because the latter had been praised by all of the gods for his excellence. Not surprisingly, the gods chase Loki away and Ægir excludes him from a great

feast that is being held at his hall. Loki, however, decides to crash the feast and, in doing so, goes on to insult the gods one by one. Finally, when Thor arrives, Loki sets off in fear, hurling one last curse at Ægir before escaping:

Ale you brewed, Ægir,
and you will never again hold a feast;
All your possessions which are here inside—
May flame play over them,
And may your back be burnt! (Larrington 95).

However, as mentioned earlier, Loki is caught and a sequence of unfortunate incidents leads to a violent earthquake, i.e. a natural disaster. Most significantly, Loki's disloyalty has spurred a domino effect of discord among the gods.

The ways in which the gods help each other are exhibited in many of the poems. For instance, in *The Lay of Thrym*, Freya lends her valuable feather-cloak to assist Thor in retrieving his hammer from the giants and, later on, Thor—who is undoubtedly the most masculine of the gods—dresses up as a woman to trick the giant Thrym and therein saves Freya from having to marry him. If these kinds of alliances had endured, *Ragnarok* might never have occurred.⁴¹

Perhaps the gods' true downfall is their change from divine behavior to something that slightly begins to resemble that of human beings, i.e. bloodshed within their own race—a change which is arguably instigated by Loki when he kills Firmafeng. Loki's actions become even darker, though, as he tricks the blind Hod into killing Baldr, his own brother and the most popular of all gods. As a result, I consider Loki to be the true antagonist of the poems—even more so than the giants—because he is poisoning his own race. The deterioration of the unity among the gods is certainly a direct parallel to that of the destruction of the Old Norse cosmos. In essence, Loki's intolerable and human-like actions upset the status quo of both the gods and the world that they inhabit.

Consequently, my production will illustrate the strength of the communal bond that the gods share in the beginning period of the Old Norse cosmos and emphasize the events, especially in relation to the character of Loki, that lead to the destruction of this fascinating world. As the relationships between the gods begin to crumble, so too does the physical world that surrounds

⁴¹ *Ragnarok* is the destruction of the Old Norse cosmos, or doom of the gods. The giants attack the gods, the gods are destroyed, and the earth collapses into the sea (Larrington xviii).

them.

Selection of Eddic Poems

The possibilities in selecting and arranging the Eddic poems for theatrical purposes are manifold. One only needs to look at other contemporary productions to recognize this fact. In general, it appears that other 21st century productions have focused on producing either one particular Eddic poem⁴² or a combination of the mythological and heroic Eddic poems. For instance, the Canadian group Sun Ergos toured with a production entitled *Thor's Hammer*, based on the poem *The Lay of Thrym* (*Brymsqviða*).⁴³ The poem in itself is entertaining, especially due to the character of Thor, who—due to a lack of intelligence—certainly provides a colorful characterization onstage. The comedic elements of the poem appear to have made it a popular one for the stage, as *The Lay of Thrym* was also performed by students in a Swedish high school class in 2001.⁴⁴ However, performing only one poem of the entire *Elder Edda* tends to reduce the complexity of the material to a snapshot of selected characters. In addition, more serious subject matter—such as Loki's betrayal and *Ragnarok*—is left untouched. Only by juxtaposing *The Lay of Thrym* against the more serious poems can a more thorough account of the Old Norse cosmos—and the beings that inhabit it—be achieved.

⁴² This was certainly the trend in the last three decades of the 20th century; these performances of singular Eddic poems include: 1979 & 1986: *Lokasenna* at Hamrahlíð College in Reykjavík 1989: *Where is my Hammer?* (based on *The Lay of Thrym*) at Iceland's National Theatre 1992: *Skirnismál* at the University of Iceland 1993: *Lokasenna* at an outdoor performance in Reykjavík

⁴³ Robert Greenwood and Dana Luebke are the co-founders of this non-profit theatre and dance company, and together they have been experimenting with the mediums of acting, dance, and song for almost three decades. Sun Ergos has a history of choosing subject matter that embraces cultural diversity, and they actually seem to regard themselves as some kind of ambassadors to world culture. Most of the poetry in their production of *Thor's hammer* was spoken; however, the duo also incorporated Scandinavian folk-songs into the mix.

⁴⁴ This performance was put on by students from Ålleberg High School in Falköping, Sweden. Information regarding this particular production is sparse, though, with the exception of the group's focus on cultural and social outreach, as it served as an important component of a political and social collaborative project, known as the Twin Town 2001 project. Basically, the project was a part of a campaign instigated by the Swedish government during its EU presidency term (January, 2001-June, 2001), and the overreaching goal was to "to help increase contacts between citizens in the Member States and candidate countries, and to spread information about EU cooperation" (*Twin Town Project On-line*). Moreover, they made particular efforts to get young people involved in the various thirty-one projects. Each project was a collaborative effort between citizens from Sweden and other EU or EU candidate countries (hence, the word "twinning project"). The students from Ålleberg teamed up with a school class from Corinth, Greece, and together they produced one of the, undoubtedly, most creative collaborations of the Twin Town project.



Fig. 3.1. Greenwood and Luebke (Sun Ergos) in their production of *Thor's Hammer* (SunErgos. <<http://www.sunergos.com>>). 2002.

In 2000, Iceland's The Possible Theatre (Möguleikhúsið's) also put on a performance of merely one Eddic poem. However, the fact that they chose the most comprehensive of the poems, *The Seeress's Prophecy* (*Voluspá*)—which the theatre entitled *The Prophecy*—separates them from Sun Ergos' and the Swedish students' *The Lay of Thrym*.⁴⁵ As mentioned in chapter II, *The Seeress's Prophecy* is the poem that accounts the creation, period of existence, and destruction of the Old Norse cosmos. Consequently, this poem contains a considerable amount of intriguing mythology that invites a variety of potential staging choices. *The Prophecy* was enacted by two performers, Pétur Eggerz and Stefán Örn Arnarson; however, only one of them (Eggerz) performed the actual text, while the other (Arnarson) played the cello. Accompanied by the sounds of Arnason's cello, Eggerz would act out a multitude of characters through vocal and physical transformations, resulting in a unique performance of song and music.⁴⁶ Although Eggerz was the only designated actor on stage, Arnason's involvement expanded beyond his cello playing and contributed significantly to the theatricality of the performance in the sense that his "sounds and noises [...] became a driving force behind the action" (Burry 15). Essentially,

⁴⁵ The theatre, which was founded in 1990, specializes in new and original works and usually tours all over Iceland every year. *The Prophecy* is no exception to this rule--in fact, the performers were commissioned to present the piece in other countries, including Canada, Germany, and Denmark.

⁴⁶ These characters include The Seeress, Odin, Baldur, Loki, Baugi--a giant--and Muninn and Huginn--Odin's ravens (Burry 16).



Fig. 3.2. Stefán Örn Arnarson (on cello) and Pétur Eggerz in The Possible Theatre's *The Prophecy* ("Theatre in Iceland." <<http://www.leikskald.is>>). 2000.

The Prophecy can be defined as a performance of storytelling or opera, which, in fact, appears to have been the mode of presentation associated with this particular production.

Although the subject matter of *The Seeress's Prophecy* is fascinating and encompassing, I do not believe that the sole emphasis on a poem written in the (narrative) *fornyrðislag* meter is an optimal way of approaching a theatrical performance of the *Elder Edda*. In other words, the poems written in the (present tense) *ljóðaháttir* meter, which contain an immediacy that contrasts with the narrative form of the *fornyrðislag* meter, would help bring these stories to life for a contemporary audience. Although The Possible Theatre might not have been concerned with character interactions and dramatic dialogue, I seek to illustrate these poems theatrically and therefore my production would utilize the dramatic dialogue of the poems written in the *ljóðaháttir* meter. Furthermore, in order to emphasize and illustrate the communal bond between the gods, more characters—and therein examples of their shared experiences—are needed.

Whereas the performances of Sun Ergos, the Swedish school class, and The Possible Theatre revolved around one Eddic poem, Sequentia's *Edda: Viking Tales of Revenge, Lust and Family Values* (2001) included several and is perhaps the most extensive contemporary Eddic performance to date. Founded in 1977, Sequentia's members have a long history of performing medieval music, and their work appears to be a mix of experimentation and extensive research.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ One of their areas of specialty is the music of Hildegard von Bingen (Bowdler).

Edda had its world premiere at Ann Arbor's Lydia Mendelssohn Theater in the spring of 2001; the following summer, it was presented at New York's Lincoln Center as a part of the Lincoln Center Festival. Sequentia built its production around *The Seeress's Prophecy* and incorporated other Eddic poems as well: *The Lay of Regin* (*Reginsmál*), *The Lay of Fafnir* (*Fáfnismál*), *The Lay of Brynhild* (*Helreið Brynhildar*), *The Short Lay of Sigurd* (*Sigurðarqviða in Scamma*), *The First Lay of Gudrun* (*Guðrúnarqviða in fyrsta*), *The Second Lay of Gudrun* (*Guðrúnarqviða onnor*), and *The Lay of Atli* (*Atlaqviða*). Although their variety of Eddic material certainly illuminates the diversity of the collection of Eddic poems, their choice of individual poems seems to be lacking a clear through-line. For instance, whereas *The Seeress's Prophecy* evolves around the Old Norse cosmos and belongs to the mythological group of Eddic poems, the rest of Sequentia's performance focuses on the heroic poems. In other words, the production can be characterized as a showcase of mythological and heroic material. Moreover, since all of the heroic poems are written in the (narrative/past tense) *fornyrðislag* meter, Sequentia's production—like that of The Possible Theatre—falls into a category of storytelling or opera. In fact, although significantly shorter, Sequentia's *Edda* seems to strongly resemble Wagner's operatic masterpiece *The Ring of the Nibelung*.⁴⁸ Essentially, Sequentia's sole focus on song and music, and the exclusion of poems written in *ljóðaháttir* meter, classifies the production as a purely operatic piece.

Bertha Phillpotts referred to the Eddic poems as a “medley” of “style and spirit,” and I believe that a variety of poems is needed in order to embrace the variance of characters, themes, and genres (26). Only then can the complexity of the Old Norse cosmos be more fully explored. On the other hand, the Eddic poems cover so much material that if one neglects to emphasize one particular aspect, a given production might turn into a muddle of characters and storylines, especially if one is attempting to incorporate both the mythological and heroic poems. Consequently, my production will focus on the mythological Eddic poems. In terms of meter, the majority of the poems will consist of the dramatic *present tense* dialogue of the poems written in the *ljóðaháttir* meter, although some narration will be included. Furthermore, these

⁴⁸ *The Ring of the Nibelung* (also known as *The Ring Cycle*), was composed in the years 1853 to 1874. This 19th century composition is comprised of three operas, *The Rhine Gold*, *The Valkyrie*, and *The Twilight of the Gods*, and revolves around the gods and goddesses, valkyries, dwarves, giants, dragons, and humans of the Old Norse Cosmos. However, since Wagner drew on a variety of sources besides from the Eddic poems, mainly the German Epic *Nibelungenlied* and the (Old Icelandic) *Völsunga Saga*—and created his own text based on these—his monumental opera cannot be viewed as a pure *Elder Edda* production.

poems cannot be selected at random but need to serve the overall production concept.

Since *The Seeress's Prophecy* is a narrative poem, I find that it will serve well as a kind of prologue and epilogue for my production. Moreover, I will incorporate certain stanzas from *The Seeress's Prophecy* as well as *The Sayings of the High One (Havamal)*—a poem which provides short commentaries on ancient sentiments—in between other poems.⁴⁹ By doing so, the production will have a relatively clear beginning, middle, and end. Moreover, in addition to clarifying the basic elements of the Old Norse cosmos, the beginning stanzas of *The Seeress's Prophecy* perfectly illustrate the harmonic bond that exists between the gods at this particular time. Further into the poem, other events are accounted which shed light on the breaking of this bond and foreshadow the downfall of the cosmos.

In order to utilize the dramatic elements and subject matter that are relevant to my production concept, the remainder of the poems will only include mythological poems written in the *ljóðaháttir* meter. For this purpose, I have selected *Vafthrudnir's Sayings*, *Skirnir's Journey*, *The Lay of Thrym*, *The Insolence of Loki*, and *Baldr's Dreams*. *Vafthrudnir's Sayings* and *The Lay of Thrym* are both perfect examples of the many quests that the gods had to embark on to continually challenge and overpower the giants. Furthermore, they demonstrate the ways in which the gods assist one another in order to uphold the strength within their community. In addition, *The Lay of Thrym* also introduces the character of Loki before he turns on his fellow gods as opposed to *The Insolence of Loki*, which I will use to illustrate the beginning of the gods' downfall. *Baldr's Dreams* is a foreshadowing of the destruction of the Old Norse cosmos. In short, these poems, together with *The Seeress's Prophecy* and *The Sayings of the High One*, will provide a comprehensive storyline, especially once they are combined with other production elements and modes of performance. Moreover, this grouping of poems perfectly illuminates the various stages of community: from the idyllic beginning where alliances and friendships are intact to the onset of betrayal, disloyalty, breach of community, and the destruction of the gods and their world.

⁴⁹ Phillpotts categorized *The Seeress's Prophecy* and *The Sayings of the High One* as “the two great monologues” of the mythological Eddic poems (121). The “High One” is another name for Odin (the highest of the gods).

Modes of Performance

Since I am striving for a cohesive rather than fragmented production, I want to add certain elements to the written text as a means of tying the individual poems together. Some of these elements resemble modes of performance that the medieval Icelanders were likely to use whereas others are inventions on my part. Whether they belong to the former or latter group, my intent is to heighten the theatricality of the performance as well as clarifying the subject matter that may not be included in some of the poems. In the context of medieval Iceland, some of these clarifications were undoubtedly left out due to audiences' familiarity with their ancient mythology. For contemporary, non-Scandinavian audiences, however, I seek to fill in at least some of these cultural blanks. Before discussing the specific moments that need clarification, I will provide a more in-depth list of the different modes of performance that will be applied on various levels in this production and explain how one might want to approach these.

Song, music, and dance have always held a prominent place in ancient Icelandic culture and continued to do so in the middle ages. Indeed, discussions of these aspects have appeared throughout this thesis. For instance, in chapter one, I noted on the role of dancing in relation to pagan rituals (see figure 7). Furthermore, elements of song and music were addressed in my examination of Andrew Heusler's observations on the lyrical nature and rhythmic patterns of the Eddic poems, as well as his idea that at the poetry was either sung or chanted. It is important to recognize this emphasis that the Icelandic people placed on song and music; it is definitely a part of their culture that seems to have been integrated on many levels.⁵⁰ Consequently, the elements of song and music, as well as dance, hold a prominent place in my production of the *Elder Edda*.

Although Sequentia's *Edda* did not feature dancing, their extensive research and employment of song and music is impressive. For example, despite the fact that the actual pronunciation of Icelandic has changed significantly since the early middle ages, the group made efforts to recreate the original sounds of the Eddic. Although their efforts to create "authentic" vocalization are fascinating, one might wonder how it would be possible to (re)compose melody for oral poetry such as the *Elder Edda*, especially when considering that the earliest written

⁵⁰ For instance, Ursula Dronke mentions a "native custom of love-singing, in which men and women sang lascivious verses to each other" (*Myth and Fiction in Early Norse Lands* 146). This custom was apparently frowned on by the clergy. Dronke notes that, at the end of the eleventh century, one of the bishops struggled against the "immorality" of these love songs. As a result, even though he was not able to ban them, they were never recorded in writing.

accounts on Scandinavian music are from as late as the 18th century. Essentially, the ensemble's attempts at reconstructing Eddic vocalization call forth several issues that have helped me to clarify my own production choices.

One noteworthy aspect of Sequentia's endeavors is their employment of "modal language," a concept that the group has explored other medieval performance projects.

According to Bagby, Sequentia's musical director:

Briefly, we identify mode not as a musical scale, but rather as a collection of gestures and signs which can be interiorized, varied, combined, and used as a font to create musical 'texts' which can be completely new while possessing the authentic integrity of the original material. But [...] we need a strong knowledge of the practices of singing Eddic poetry as it still exists in various world cultures to show us how such performances must be given a form and soul. (11)

In order to gain such knowledge, and develop what he refers to as a "genetic code," Bagby spent much time in the tape archives of Iceland's Árna Magnúsonar Institute, where he investigated Icelandic folk music and *rímur* traditions, which basically is a type of lyrical chanting or intonation (Bagby 12). Although *rímur* were produced from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century, Bagby believes that they have roots in much earlier Icelandic poetry. Indeed, the connection between Eddic poetry and *rímur* traditions is one that has been assumed by other scholars as well, including the renowned German philologist, Dietrich Hofmann and Joseph Harris, professor of mathematics at Harvard University.⁵¹

I find the notion of the *rímur* traditions to be intriguing, especially since Sequentia's success in employing this kind of chanting emphasizes Heusler's theory that chanting is an effective mode of expressing Eddic poetry—especially due to the infrequency of syllables.⁵² Consequently, I will apply the mode of lyrical chanting to the poems in my production. This only leaves the prose bits that sometimes precede, intercept, or conclude the given poems—as discussed in chapter one. In order to both clarify and dramatize the various actions written in prose, these passages will be acted out as well as narrated, while accompanied by music.

Since there are no extant manuscripts about medieval Nordic music, knowledge of Old

⁵¹ Further information on Harris' theories on this particular subject can be found in his article "'Ethnopaology' and Recovered Performance: The Problematic Witnesses to 'Eddic Song'."

⁵² The members of Sequentia do not refer to Heusler when explaining their research. Hence, the fact that they reached a similar theory of chanting seems to highlight this mode of expression.

Norse music instruments prior to and during the Middle Ages is scant. Nonetheless, it is commonly assumed that some forms of lyres, fiddles, and pipes were known (Foote 188). Consequently, Sequentia's *Edda* featured two lyres, two 5-string fiddles, one 4-string fiddle, one 3-string fiddle, wooden flutes, and a swan bone flute as well as a harp and an elk-skin drum. The 4-string fiddle used in their production was reconstructed based upon an eleventh century drawing (which was found in an English Psalter)⁵³ to resemble a fiddle from the fourth century. The lyre was "a copy of an instrument recovered from a seventh century Aldermanic grave," and the harp was reconstructed based on remains of a medieval harp which was found in seventeenth century Germanic burial sites (Bagby 12). Evidently, the group member who contributed most significantly to these recreations is Elizabeth Gaver who—in addition to serving as Sequentia's principal fiddler—also embarked on two research trips to Scandinavia. In doing so, she was able to retrieve some valuable information about an instrument known as *hardingfele*⁵⁴ (or Hardanger Fiddle), about which she states:

The *hardingfele* is essentially a violin with the addition of four or five resonance strings running under the fingerboard. The body of the *hardingfele* is highly arched, and the bridge is nearly flat, allowing the player to easily bow two or even three strings at once. The characteristic sound of the instrument depends on its resonance, which is enhanced by the use of open tunings similar to those used on medieval fiddles [...] the *hardingfele* is also used occasionally to accompany songs, or to play an ornamented version of the song alone. (Gaver 14)



Fig. 3.3. Gaver with the reconstructed four-string fiddle ("Sequentia." June, 2001. <<http://www.sequentia.org>>).

⁵³ "A book containing the Book of Psalms or a particular version of, musical setting for, or selection from it" (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*).

⁵⁴ The *hardingfele* is often considered as Norway's national instrument.

Consequently, Sequentia's *Edda* incorporated elements of the *hardingfele* playing style into its production of *Edda*. In effect, although there is no way of knowing how exact Sequentia's musical endeavors are in comparison to the factuality of medieval song and music, most critics have praised the group's efforts.

Foote's comments on medieval instruments, as well as Sequentia's employment of the *hardingfele*, are of great aid to my research. Although I do not think that a given contemporary production needs to reconstruct medieval instruments in order to achieve a medieval "feel," I would want to use instruments such as the flute, the harp, and the fiddle as well as the horn. Not only do these particular instruments produce some beautiful sounds, but they are also capable of conveying a sense of purity which will compliment the idyllic beginning of the production, as stated in my production concept (i.e. the creation of the Old Norse cosmos and the harmony among the gods). Furthermore, these instruments are also associated with certain individual mythological characters. For instance, Bragi, the god of eloquence, poetry and song plays the harp and Heimdall, the watchman of the gods, uses a horn (*Gjallarhorn*) to warn the gods of imposing dangers (*Scandinavian Mythology and Folklore online*). Since all of these characters are included in my production, the instruments that they play will be featured as well.

Having examined the dramatic dialogue and subject matter of the mythological Eddic poems, I find a combination of the abovementioned elements—chanting, music, narration, and dance—to be the optimal way to embrace the communal spirit of the poems. Finally, it also provides a fascinating cross-disciplinary project, hence bringing together a "community" of performance practices.

Acting & Design

My intent is not to recreate the style of acting that may have been employed in the middle ages, but simply to adopt whatever style is most appropriate and effective for a 21st century production. Nonetheless, there is one element about the *leikarar* that illuminates the character traits that one might want to utilize. As earlier mentioned, the *leikarar* are said to have been relatively similar to the mimes of the Roman Republic. According to Brockett, these actors "seem to have been selected either for their physical beauty or comic ugliness" (61). Considering the colorful, and often polarizing, character descriptions that are illustrated in the

poems, this notion is not far-fetched. Moreover, the examination of other references to Norse mythology, such as the Eddic sagas, and therein the traits of the gods and giants that inhabit the ancient cosmos, reveals even more distinct characteristics. For instance, one of the most noteworthy character contrasts can be found in those of Baldr and Thor; whereas the virtuous Baldr is described as beautiful being “so fair in appearance, light shines from him,” the often comically characterized Thor is muscular and heavy (*Scandinavian Mythology and Folklore online*). Also, the giants are either radiantly beautiful (as Gerd in *Skirnir’s Journey*) or hideous, troll-like creatures (as Thrym in *The Lay of Thrym*).

In essence, familiarizing oneself with the physical attributes of the Roman mimes—and therein the *leikarar*—as well as paying attention to the character descriptions in the individual poems and other literary sources, will certainly provide a helpful guideline in regards to the casting of the *Elder Edda* (for a full breakdown of the specific roles these performers will have to fill, please see appendix 1). Of course, advances in technology, costumes and lighting can enhance these contrasting characters further.

For the staging of this production, I suggest a thrust stage. This allows for an intimate setting, in which audiences are up close on three sides of the performers, similar to the outline of the *hofs* (see chapter II). Consequently, by almost entirely surrounding the performers, the sense of community is also enhanced.

Attempting to include all of the supernatural phenomena and physical settings that are associated with the Old Norse Cosmos would both require a sizable budget and a wealth of technological resources. Moreover, if all of these elements were to be included in the scenic design, it is quite possible that they might overpower the overall performance. Since I find it important to emphasize the characters and their actions, I want to rely on more suggestive and symbolic scenic practices. Locales, such as the individual worlds of the gods and giants, should only be skeletal suggestions, and the movement from one to another should be accomplished by little more than lights.

More specifically, the design will utilize my research of ancient Scandinavian rituals. Many of the petroglyphs depicted in chapter one are imbedded in communal activities, which—along with their dramatic tone—has inspired me to incorporate some of them into various areas of my design. In terms of the scenic design, I want to project the outlines of these petroglyphs onto screens. For instance, figure 7 will serve as an appropriate backdrop when the gods unite in

their communal feasts.

The only major set piece is that of *Yggdrasil*—a massive ash tree that “links and shelters all the worlds” of the Old Norse cosmos (*MMV Encyclopedia Mythica*).⁵⁵ Essentially, *Yggdrasil*, in its connection to the various realms of this ancient world, serves as the chief symbol of the Old Norse cosmos. Due to the importance of this scenic feature, it must both be elaborate and multifaceted. Finally, since it is located in the center of the Old Norse cosmos, it should also be positioned in the center of the staging area.

Finally, it is important that the set be located on top of movable platforms, in order to create the effect of an earthquake at the end of *The Insolence of Loki* and *The Seeress’s Prophecy*. Whereas other events are merely narrated by music, these are crucial points in the overall storyline that need to shock the audience as the gods feel the consequences of Loki’s betrayal.

Lighting plays a key part in this production, mainly since its role is to clarify the various settings that are merely suggested by the scenic design. Separate locations are indicated by individual spotlights: a smaller, more concentrated spotlight follows the Seeress and larger, more diffused ones focus on the groupings of gods, humans, and giants. Furthermore, the lands of the gods and humans consist of bright hues of amber (resembling life, fertility and bliss among the gods), whereas those of the giants’ are dark and bluish (illustrating the dark, moist caves that they inhabit as well as symbolizing their evil nature).

Since this production focuses on the individual and, in most cases, colorful trademarks of each character, the costume design will help to emphasize these traits, producing a colorful ensemble of performers. The basic clothing items are relatively simple, though. All of the gods wear some types of hooded cloaks and tunics, as conveyed in the individual poems; however, in order to optimize their individuality, I find it important that these differ in both color and texture. For example, Odin is recognized by his color-shaping cloak and blackthorn spear and Freya by her feathered falcon cloak (Larrington x). Also, since Baldr is known for his radiance, his cloak should be particularly enchanting, made out of a shiny material, such as silk. The gods are

⁵⁵ Beneath the three roots [of *Yggdrasil*] the realms of Asgard, Jotunheim, and Niflheim are located. Three wells lie at its base: the Well of Wisdom (*Mimisbrunnr*), guarded by Mimir; the Well of Fate (*Urdarbrunnr*), guarded by the Norns; and the Roaring Kettle (*Hvergelmir*), the source of many rivers. Four deer run across the branches of the tree and eat the buds; they represent the four winds. There are other inhabitants of the tree, such as the squirrel “Swift Teeth” (*Ratatosk*), a notorious gossip, and “Tree Snake” (*Vidofnir*), the golden cock that perches on the topmost bough. The roots are gnawed upon by Nidhogg and other serpents. On the day of *Ragnarok*, the fire giant Surt will set the tree on fire.

characterized further by their accessories, such as Freya's "magical amber necklace," Thor's "iron gloves and a belt of strength," and Odin's "magical ring" (Larrington xvi-xvii). Thus, the individuality of the gods is depicted by their unique accessories, while their cloaks and tunics unify their shared community.

The combination of uniqueness and unity of the giants will also be illuminated in the costumes that they wear. For instance, whereas the cave giants will wear pieces of fleece that barely cover their bodies, the frost giants will be wrapped with multiple layers of fur.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the costume design involves those of disguises and shape-changing. The use of disguises is highly emphasized in the poems, one that is especially connected to the gods' means of tricking the giants. In this production of the *Elder Edda*, Odin and Thor will take on a variety of disguises when traveling to the land of the giants. For instance, Odin is disguised as a poor wanderer in *Vafthrudnir's Sayings*, and Thor disguises himself as a woman in *The Lay of Thrym*. Every time one of these gods prepares for such a disguise-related journey, the ensemble of gods will assist in dressing them—hence stressing the fact that these journeys are upholding and protecting the sense of community.

Undoubtedly, the most encompassing costuming challenge is that of Loki's in *The Insolence of Loki*, in which he changes into the shape of a salmon. In practicality, this effect is difficult to achieve, which is why—in order to clarify the event—an assisting prose passage has been provided. Nonetheless, since this disguise is connected to Loki's betrayal of the gods, the costume will suggest this transformation symbolically rather than attempting to create a realistic-looking salmon. Specifically, in order to illuminate Loki's change of loyalty—from the gods to the giants—the costume will be made of a kind of gray fur, and the ensemble of giants will assist the character with his costume change.

Finally, the ancient petroglyphs have also inspired my selection of certain accessories and props. These include spears, horns, hammers, and the widely discussed cauldron. The latter will hold a prominent place in the parts that revolve around feasting.

Production Synopsis

Now that I have provided some information about the various elements of design, I will demonstrate how these—in conjunction with my concept on communal practices and bonding—

factor into my production synopsis.

The opening lines of the play will begin with a spotlight on the single performer who is playing the character of the Seeress:

Attention I ask from all the sacred people,
Greater and lesser, the offspring of Heimdall;
Father of the slain, you wished that I should declare
The ancient histories of men and gods, those which I
remember from the first. (Larrington 4)

As she continues into the second verse, the lights come up and fog drapes the stage as the Old Norse cosmos is revealed before the eyes of the audience. The gods, giants, and humans enter, forming individual groups onstage with the gods in the center (by *Yggdrasil*). As the Seeress continues her chanting, the characters playing Frey, Freya, and Bragi accompany her on the lyre flute, and harp respectively; other gods link hands in a dance, illustrating their idyllic community.

When the Seeress has finished her chanting about the creation of the universe, the first account of Odin's quests, *Vafthrudnir's Sayings*, is acted out onstage. As Odin and the giant Vafthrudnir engage in their debate, selected ensemble members encircle these two performers, thus playing the role of a participating and reacting audience (as a way of symbolizing the communal gatherings that the poem might have accompanied during the middle ages). As Odin returns to the land of the gods, he greeted by joyous gods who encircle him in dance-like movements, after which Odin addresses them with a stanza from *The Sayings of the High One*, accompanied by music:

Wise that man seems who knows how to question
And how to answer well;
The sons of men cannot keep secret
What's already going around. (Larrington 18)

The music continues as the lights go down on Odin and the ensemble of gods; simultaneously, the lights rise on Thor, who is waking up after a night's rest. This is the beginning of *The Lay of Thrym*.

Freyia addresses the audience, informing them of Thor's missing hammer. Then, the music fades out, the dialogue begins, and the humorous events which revolve around Thor,

Freyia, Loki, and the giant Thrym are acted out. Again, when Thor and Thrym meet for the final challenge, other ensemble members become active audience members. The concluding prose part is also narrated by Freya.

As Thor returns to the land of gods, Freya may embrace him as other gods celebrate in yet another victory. Underscored by music, Thor turns to the ensemble of gods and narrates the opening prose part of *Skirnir's Journey* (Frey and Skirnir should be positioned on the opposite side of the stage from Gerd, the giantess). Throughout the poem, as Skirnir embarks on his journey, lights will still be up on Thor and his "audience" as he fills them in on the more extensive actions by means of narration.

In this production, *Skirnir's Journey* is the third and final account of the communal bond and triumphs that are shared by the gods. When Skirnir returns to Frey with the good news of Gerd's consent to marry him, the lights darken, and lights come up on Loki who is in the act of strangling Firmafeng. The account, as it is written in *The Insolence of Loki*, is narrated by the Seeress and sets this poem into motion.

As *The Insolence of Loki* ends with an earthquake which is felt by both gods, humans, and giants alike, the Seeress begins her account of the events that lead to the doom of the gods. Loki's manipulation of Hod and Hod's murdering of his own brother is acted out, possible in slow-motion set to music, thus emphasizing the horror and ultimate doom of this particular event. Irregular beatings of drums along with the sounds from Heimdall's horn add to the chaos, and a final earth-shaking shudder leaves the stage dark and empty; only a dim beam of light remains, foreshadowing the oncoming of a new world. As this beam slowly fades, the barking of the monstrous hound, Garm, is heard in the distance.⁵⁶

I feel that my approach to the mythological Eddic poems provides a substantive account of the characters of the Old Norse cosmos and serves my overall production concept of the breaking of the gods' communal bond. Furthermore, employing poems with both comedic and tragic elements illuminates the diversity of the material. Keeping in mind that the Eddic poems were performed in the early Middle Ages, there is no reason why they should succumb to a literary status in the twenty-first century. That being said, I hope that this production outline, even if not fully adhered to, will at least inspire contemporary theatre practitioners to continue to

⁵⁶ Garm's barking is said to have signified the end of the old world and beginning of the new (Foote 346).

breathe life into these legendary tales and stage productions of the *Elder Edda* all around the world.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have argued that the Icelandic Eddic poems used to be performed as some kinds of theatrical pieces and that they should continue to be performed today. Yet, why is it so important to recognize these poems? Why should anyone care about the Old Norse deities and their endeavors? Essentially, the Eddic poems introduce us to a set of beliefs which still resonate with many contemporary Icelanders; moreover, the communal values that are emphasized in these poems are undoubtedly relevant to theatre audiences outside of Scandinavia as well. Furthermore, the poems' significance to theatre history has yet to be fully acknowledged by theatre historians in Scandinavian and non-Scandinavian countries alike. Not only do I find it important that the poems are conceptualized in performance, but it is wrong for them to be left out of major scholarly works and continue to be studied as an entity separate from the field of theatre.

First, the Eddic poems shed light on contemporary Icelandic beliefs. As mentioned in chapter one, the faith systems of the country are intriguing—especially the commonly held beliefs in elves, fairies, and other supernatural beings. Likewise, medieval locations associated with pagan worshipping, as described in chapter two, are still highly regarded by the majority of the Icelanders. For instance, the Helgafell mound is still embedded in superstitious rituals: it is said that anyone who walks to the top of the mound, without speaking, looking back, and having any bad thoughts will be granted a wish (Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe* 14). In essence, associations to non-Christian beliefs—including those of Old Norse mythology—are still embedded in the country's culture today. Consequently, it is fascinating to recognize the extent to which the Eddic poems are capable of serving as a source of cultural illumination.

Upon further investigation into the subject matter of the mythological *Elder Edda*, it is not surprising that elements that resonate in these old pagan belief systems still appeal to contemporary Icelanders. Indeed, I argue that the continued interest in the Eddic poems is largely explained by the timeless values that these poems exhibit. As reflected in my production concept—and throughout my thesis—the focus on community holds a prominent place in the

Elder Edda. Yet, there are other elements that stand out in the poems and deserve to be mentioned as well. These elements include courage, generosity, moderation, and kindness. Certainly, these are values that are able to appeal to other nations as well, and thereby attract audiences on a world-wide level.

Acts of courage are seen throughout the poems and are closely connected to the communal bond that the gods share; i.e. the courageous quests that these gods embark on are mainly for the purpose of upholding peace and protecting their fellow gods—their kin. Indeed, showing signs of weakness is frowned upon in the Old Norse cosmos, as demonstrated in the following lines from *Sayings of the High One*:

The foolish man thinks he will live forever,
If he keeps away from fighting;
But old age won't grant him a truce
Even if the spears do. (Larrington 16)

Several of the Eddic poems feature elaborate feasts that are hosted by individual gods. Surely, these gatherings exemplify the importance of maintaining the communal bond between the gods, but they also emphasize the high levels of generosity that these gods possess. Likewise, in medieval Iceland, it was not uncommon for people to display acts of generosity, such as inviting a stranger in for a meal or a place to spend the night (Dronke *Pagan Scandinavia* 34). In essence, sharing one's surplus with those who are less fortunate is highly valued in the Eddic poems, as was also the case in medieval Iceland. Likewise, acts of generosity, such as charity work—especially during times of hardship—are both valued and admired in today's society, thus emphasizing how a contemporary audience could easily relate to the prominence of this particular asset.

Knowing how to act moderately, especially when subjected to acts of generosity, is also a virtue that must be upheld. In his comments on the medieval Icelanders, Foote notes that “moderation is needed, in eating and drinking, in speech, in the use of power, even in the gifts which found and promote friendship” (342). Thus, both the recipient and benefactor cannot be too excessive. *Sayings of the High One* provides an astonishing account of such acts of moderation. For instance, when it comes to eating and drinking, the poem states that “the foolish man never knows the measure of his own stomach” and “a man shouldn't hold onto the cup but drink mead in moderation;” in terms of excessive speech, it is advised that “the foolish man in

company does best if he stays silent; no one will know that he knows nothing, unless he talks too much;” and in regards to abusing someone else’s hospitality, the poem concludes that “the loved man is loathed if he sits too long in someone else’s hall (Larrington 16-19). Moderation may be more valued and adhered to in Scandinavia than in other Western countries; for instance, competitiveness is usually not revered. Nonetheless, in today’s society—where materialism and overspending seems to be on a rapid increase--this is certainly a quality that everyone could learn from.

Finally, kindness is highly valued among the Icelanders, especially in relation to family and community. Interestingly, Foote notes the fact that the Icelandic words “kindness” and “kin” share the same root words, hence stressing the inherent connection between the two (354). Surely, acts of kindness are valued on a world-wide level. Perhaps the Eddic poems can serve as a reminder for families in the twenty-first century to remember to make room for kindness in their often stressful and busy schedules, especially in relation to their kin/family. Especially since the concept and status of “family” in most countries, including the United States, has changed dramatically over the past fifty years—from a decrease in traditional nuclear families to an increase in divorce rates, single-parenthood, and lack of care for elderly family members (“The American Family,” *U.S. Society & Values*). Indeed, the Eddic poems’ heightened focus on community and family is inspirational.

Not only are these community-related elements—courage, generosity, moderation, and kindness—exhibited in selected characters and storylines of the Eddic poems but, in addition, the poems written in the *ljóðaháttir* meter are constructed in such a way that the full lines of a given stanza often functions as a punch line that, in turn, has a proverbial “ring.” These proverbs include “everything is easy at home” and “a return should render the gift” (Foote 344). In a sense, these proverbs stress that acts of courage, generosity, moderation, and kindness should not merely be taken as suggestions but adhered to. Essentially, the contemporary relevance of the communal values that are illuminated in the *Elder Edda*, combined with their historical and theatrical significance, emphasizes the value this collection of poems represents and the way in which they may serve as a source of inspiration for audiences in the twenty-first century.

Today, if people are asked about their knowledge of Scandinavian theatre, they are undoubtedly most likely to mention one of two key playwrights, Ibsen and Strindberg; and

maybe, under rare circumstances, the Danish seventeenth century playwright Ludvig Holberg.⁵⁷ Indeed, any recognized contributions of Scandinavian theatre are limited to the seventeenth century and beyond. By illuminating the theatricality, performance history, and cultural value of the Eddic poems, I hope to have at least sparked an interest in a different era of Scandinavian theatre history.

The *Elder Edda* continues to hold a prominent place in the fields of folklore and literature, yet it is rarely addressed in that of theatre studies. For instance, Oscar G. Brockett's *History of the Theatre*—one of the most wide-ranging theatre text books to date—passes up any references to the poems. Not only is there no mention of them, but Iceland as a whole is completely omitted. Moreover, in terms of ancient theatre history, Scandinavian and non-Scandinavian theatre text books alike neglect to mention the likelihood of ancient Scandinavian dramatic activities as well as the area's significant history of oral tradition.⁵⁸

Although I realize the major contributions and influences that ancient Greece carries in the field of theatre history, I find the tendency to solely attribute this country with “the origins of theatre” to be somewhat clear-cut. Granted, the only extant ancient plays and theatre theory texts are derived from Greece, but there are other sources, even if these are not as developed, that deserve attention as well. For instance, as demonstrated in chapter one of this thesis, ancient Scandinavian stone engravings and petroglyphs clearly hint towards some types of dramatic activities.

Essentially, who is to say that the “origins” of theatre had to evolve in one area of the world? I do not think it is correct to exclude the possibility that other countries had their own unique dramatic practices. Perhaps this thesis—in addition to emphasizing the value that the *Elder Edda* may add to the field of theatre studies—can inspire theatre scholars to reexamine the ways in which theatre history is most commonly perceived. Straightforward conclusions, although easily achieved, are not always exact. Let us continue to revisit the historical past.

⁵⁷ Mostly known for his comedies, Holberg was the first Danish playwright to write in the vernacular language.

⁵⁸ The only book--although I would not classify it as a designated text book--that acknowledges these elements is Terry Gunnel's *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (1995).

APPENDIX A

CHARACTERS OF THE *ELDER EDDA*

Unless otherwise noted, resources for this cast of characters are based on Carolyne Larrington's examinations of the Old Norse cosmos and the characters that it inhabited (xiii-xvii).

The Seeress—A mesmerizing character who, per Odin's request, recounts the creation and destruction of the Old Norse cosmos.

Odin—The king of all gods; deity of war, poetry, trickery, and wisdom. He is often depicted as a one-eyed, long-bearded old man.⁵⁹

Frigg—Odin's wife. She is a compassionate goddess who dies of grief when Baldr is killed by Hod.

Thor—Odin's bearded son, the patron of farmers and sailors. He is the strongest of all gods, although not the most intelligent. Thor is recognized by his famous hammer, *Miollnir*, which he uses to fight the giants.

Loki—Odin's foster brother, capable of shape-changing. Despite his cunning and evil character, he is among the most handsome of the gods.

Freyr—God of fruitfulness. Handsome and sympathetic.

Freyia—Freyr's sister, who is known as the beautiful goddess of love. She has many lovers, including her own brother.

Skirnir—Freyr's messenger. Particularly adventurous and courageous.

In addition to these major characters, my production includes a general ensemble of gods, giants, and humans. The following is a breakdown of the specific roles these performers will

⁵⁹ Odin gave up one of his eyes in exchange for wisdom (Larrington ix).

have to fill in the various poems:

Skirnir's Journey

Herdsmen

Serving-maid.

Gerd—A beautiful giantess.

Vafthrudnir's Sayings

Vafthrudnir—Giant

The Lay of Thrym

Thrym—Giant

The Insolence of Loki

Bragi—god of eloquence, poetry, and song; sings and plays on a golden harp

Idunn—Bragi's wife; goddess of spring and immortal youth.

Gefion—goddess of virginity; patroness of human kings

Sif—Thor's golden-haired wife.

Heimdall—human/watchman of the gods

Njord—Freyr and Freyja's father. He is the god of summer and "is usually depicted with a short green tunic, crown of shells upon his head and seaweed in his hair"

(*Scandinavian Mythology and Folklore online*).

Skadi—Njord's wife, goddess of winter

Byggvir—Freyr's servant

Beyla—Freyr's servant

Narfi—Loki's son

Sigyn—Loki's wife

Eldir—servant

Baldr's Dream

Dead Prophetess

The Seeress's Prophecy

Baldr—son of Odin and Frigg; the most beautiful and beloved of the gods.

Hod—Baldr's brother, blind

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

EVA NIELSEN

Education

- MA Theatre Studies, Florida State University, School of Theatre, April, 2005.** Curriculum included Dramaturgy, Western Theatre History, History of Directing, Dramatic Theory, Post-War British Theatre, and production work. Thesis: “The *Elder Edda* Revisited: Past and Present Performances of the Icelandic Eddic Poems.”
- BA Florida State University, School of Theatre, December, 1998.** Graduated *Magna cum Laude*. Curriculum included Play Analysis, Directing, Playwriting, Acting I (techniques), Acting II (scene study), Acting III (Shakespeare), Voice I & II, Brecht & Epic Theatre, Stage Make-Up, Creative Improvisation, and production work.
- AA Tallahassee Community College, August, 1996.** Graduated *Magna cum Laude*.

Teaching and Coaching

Florida State University, School of Theatre, August, 2004 - April, 2005

Graduate Teaching Assistant: Introduction to Theatre for Non-Majors (THE 2000)

Responsibilities include: Assisting professor with in-class assignments and demonstrations; grading of papers, quizzes, and exams; mentoring students.

Florida State University, August, 2003 - April, 2004

Graduate Teaching Assistant/Assistant Coach for FSU’s Forensics (speech and debate) Team. Select literature and coach team members in Reader’s Theatre, Dramatic and Duo Interpretation, Prose, Poetry, Program Oral Interpretation, and After Dinner Speaking.

Maclay High School, 2000 - 2002

Drama Teacher, grades 9-12

In addition to teaching Acting and Theatre Production, I was also in charge of extra-curricular activities and prepared students for Thespian Competitions. Under my guidance, several Maclay students qualified for the State Thespian Competition in the Spring of 2002, where they went on to receive several Superior rankings. One student was awarded the acclaimed Critic’s Choice

Award in the Monologue Category.

Tallahassee Community College, 1997 - 2002

Voluntary Coach for TCC's nationally acclaimed forensics (speech and debate) team. Coached team members in all of the interpretive events including Duo, Drama, Poetry, Prose, and Reader's Theatre. Traveled with the team to numerous tournaments and assisted at home tournaments, where tasks included schedule planning and database entry.

University School, Ft. Lauderdale, summers of 1997 & 1998

Conducted Voice/Movement Workshops for high school students (grades 9-12) at the Florida Forensics Institute.

Related Work Experience

Tallahassee Little Theatre, 1999 - 2000

Administrative Assistant

Assisting with membership database entries, program lay-outs, grant applications, and mailings.

Production and Performance

Directing

<i>The Miracle Worker</i>	March 2005	Tallahassee Community College (TCC)
<i>The Dining Room</i>	February 2002	Maclay High School, Tallahassee
<i>Absolutely Murder</i>	May 2001	Maclay High School, Tallahassee
<i>The Original Last Wish Baby</i>	February 2001	Maclay High School, Tallahassee

Co-Directing

<i>The Rainmaker</i>	November 2000	Tallahassee Community College (TCC)
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Dramaturgy

<i>Romeo & Juliet</i>	April 2005	FSU Main Stage Theatre
<i>The Miracle Worker</i>	February 2005	Tallahassee Community College (TCC)
<i>The Hound of the Baskervilles</i>	November 2004	Tallahassee Community College (TCC)
<i>Working</i>	October 2004	Tallahassee Community College (TCC)

Acting - Theatre

Selected:

<i>What of the Night?</i>	Greta	The Studio Theatre, FSU
<i>The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui</i>	Multiple Roles	The Lab Theatre, FSU
<i>Playing By Ear</i>	Principal	Ohm Cafe, Tallahassee
<i>The Hobbit</i>	Multiple Roles	Radioactive Entertainment
<i>The Heiress</i>	Maria	Tallahassee Little Theatre
<i>Temptation</i>	Marketta	Turner Auditorium, TCC
<i>The Dining Room</i>	Multiple Roles	Turner Auditorium, TCC

Acting - Film

<i>Vampire Rock</i>	Eve/Principal	Oak Harbor Productions (Feature)
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<i>Anderson</i>	Greta/Principal	FSU School of Film (Graduate Thesis)
<i>Deception</i>	Lucy/Principal	FSU School of Film (Graduate)

Acting - Radio & Television

<i>Opening Nights</i> (original radio drama by Janet Burroway)	Gunilla/Principal	National Public Radio
Florida Fresh Produce	Voice Talent	Florida Dept. of Agriculture
The Bonati Institute	Principal	Ides Media

Technical Production

Sound Board Operator	<i>Hay Fever</i>	FSU Main Stage Theatre
Light Board Operator	<i>Top Girls</i>	The Lab Theatre, Tallahassee
Sound Board Operator	<i>The Foreigner</i>	Turner Auditorium, TCC

Research/Teaching Interests

Scandinavian Studies (including Norse Mythology, Nationalism, Ibsen and Strindberg); Theatre History (especially Ancient, Medieval, and Realism); Performance Studies; Acting (including oral interpretation of literature); Directing; Dramaturgy; Brecht & Epic Theatre.

Awards & Achievements

PIE (Program for Instructional Excellence) Certificate

Florida State University, August 20, 2004

Attended sessions on Syllabi Basics; Teaching Large Classes; Communicating with your Students; Using Reflection to Improve Teaching; Issues in Grading; Strategies to Access Learning; Sexual Harassment and Sexual Battery Policy Training; Ethics and Academic Honor Code.

Brian Swan Theatre Scholarship	1995-1996	Tallahassee Community College
Outstanding Student Academic Award	1996	Tallahassee Community College
Outstanding Achievement Award	1996	Tallahassee Theatre Guild
Superior Rating (Acting/ <i>Temptation</i>)	1996	Florida Community College Association

Special Skills

Languages

Danish (Native); Norwegian (Very Good); Swedish (Good); German (Reading); Latin, Old Icelandic (Notions)

Musical training

10 years of classical piano