The Fox as a Dying Hero: An Edition and Translation of the Late Medieval Icelandic Poem Skaufalabálkur

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ABSTRACT: The late-medieval Icelandic poem Skaufalabálkur describes the final hunting trip of an old fox in a style mimicking heroic epic. The work is traditionally connected with poets working at or near Skarð in Western-Iceland in the 15th century and we argue here that the language of the poem is consistent with that dating. This new edition presents a text of the poem based on the oldest manuscript with some advances in the reading and interpretation of certain words. The translation aims to accurately transmit the poem’s rich vocabulary pertaining to the life of foxes and medieval farming in the subarctic and to accessibly convey a satiric gem to a modern audience.

RÉSUMÉ: Le poème islandais de la fin du Moyen Âge Skaufalabálkur décrit la dernière chasse d'un vieux renard dans un style imitant l'épopée héroïque. L'œuvre est traditionnellement liée à des poètes travaillant à Skarð ou dans ses environs, dans l'ouest de l'Islande, au XVe siècle, et nous soutenons ici que la langue du poème est cohérente avec cette datation. Cette nouvelle édition présente un texte du poème basé sur le plus ancien manuscrit, avec quelques avancées dans la lecture et l'interprétation de certains mots. La traduction vise à transmettre avec précision le riche vocabulaire du poème relatif à la vie des renards et à l'agriculture médiévale dans le subarctique, et à transmettre de manière accessible un joyau satirique à un public moderne.
Introduction

The late medieval Icelandic Skaufalabálkur [The Poem of Sheaf-Tail] has long been appreciated for its humour and flair. The poem describes the final hunting trip of an old fox, in the process offering some details about contemporary Icelandic farmsteads. While it prompts comparisons with medieval European animal fables and epics, its satiric thrust is directed more to northern literary conventions than to human social behaviour. Sheaf-Tail’s interaction with his vixen and his account of his adventures with sheep, sheep-dogs, shepherds, and farmers recall both the incitination scenes of the sagas of Icelanders and the Old Norse life poem [ævídrápa], typically extemporized by a hero at death’s door. The author also pokes fun at Icelanders’ penchant for old saws, forebodings, and fatalism. The worst is always just around the corner of the byre.

The aims of this new edition are to render the poem more accessible and to make progress on the philological and semantic challenges of the text. We have done our best to find the most accurate English equivalents of the poem’s semi-technical terms associated with medieval subarctic farm life and vulpine ethology. To enable a seamless reading of the poem as a whole, we have opted against interrupting the flow of the text with critical commentary, instead relegating textual notes to the end. Our translation aims to provide a pleasant reading experience and to capture as much as possible of the charm and mock-seriousness of the original work.

Authorship and Dating

The authorship of the poem is a surprisingly confusing question. According to Jón lærði [the learned] Guðmundsson (1574–1658), a poet named Einar fóstri [the fosterer / fostered] composed both Skaufalabálkur and Skíðaríma [the ríma of Skíði] – another poem which takes a humorous look at Old Norse heroes and heroic conventions. There is little reliable information to be had about Einar fóstri. Jón reports that he was the poet of Björn Einarsson Jórsalafari [Jerusalem-Traveler] (d. 1415) but it is clear that there has been some confusion between Björn Einarsson and the later magnate Björn Þorleifsson (c. 1408–1467). Firstly, Jón reports that the wife of his Björn was Ólöf, but this is not true of Björn Einarsson, whose wife was Solveig. It is, however, true of Björn Þorleifsson whose wife was Ólöf Loftsdóttir (c. 1410–1479). Secondly, Jón tells a story involving Björn, Ólöf, Greenland, and some trolls (Ólafur Halldórsson 44–45) but a very similar story is found in an older source, Byskupsannálar [Bishop Annals] by Jón Egilsson (1548 – c. 1636), and in that case it is about Björn Þorleifsson and Ólöf Loftsdóttir (Ólafur Halldórsson 242–243).
Some further details about the poet are found in eighteenth-century sources. Erlandur Ölafsson (1706–1772) reports that Einar fóstri accompanied Ölóf Loftsdóttir to Denmark in 1468 when she went before King Christian to seek justice for her slain husband. According to this source, Einar fóstri composed Skíðaríma on the way back to Iceland that same year (Björn K. Þórólfsson 380). Adding to the confusion, some other eighteenth-century sources report that the author was not Einar fóstri but Sigurður fóstri (d. c. 1449). Jón Ólafsson (1705–1779) relates that Sigurður fóstri composed Skíðaríma on a return trip from Jerusalem to Iceland with Ölóf Loftsdóttir in c. 1440 (Björn K. Þórólfsson 381). According to some nineteenth-century source, Sigurður fóstri composed both Skaufalabálkur and Skíðaríma (Homan 115-116, 126).

A third candidate for the name of our author is Svartur at Hofstaðir. This is the authorial attribution of Skaufalabálkur in the final stanza of the poem in the eighteenth-century manuscript Rask 87. Since this attribution is a part of the poem itself it is, at first glance, more credible than most. However, Rask 87 is a late manuscript and its version of Skaufalabálkur has several stanzas not found in the earlier sixteenth-century Hólsbók (AM 603 4to; for more detail see the next section). We do not know if Hólsbók had this final stanza since a leaf has been lost from the manuscript. Confusingly, the text by Jón “the learned” which attributes Skaufalabálkur to Einar fóstri contains an alternative version of this final strophe which, indeed, attributes the poem to Einar. Possibly, one version is the original and the other is a later attempt to correct it. Or possibly there were two poems with the name Skaufalabálkur, one by Svartur, which is preserved, and one by Einar, of which we only have the final strophe.

According to Jón lærði, Svartur at Hofstaðir was a poet who composed for, yet again, Ölóf Loftsdóttir (Jón Þorkelsson 1899, 244). The name Svartur is rare and as pointed out by Jón Þorkelsson (1899) this Svartur at Hofstaðir must be the same man as Svartur Þórðarson who sold the farm Hofstaðir in the Westfjords in 1477 as attested in a contemporary document written at Skarð in northwest Iceland (245). The location is highly significant since Skarð was the home of Ölóf Loftsdóttir and Björn Þorleifsson, the supposed patrons of the poet. Finally, there is one manuscript of Skíðaríma which attributes it, with some doubt, to Svartur at Hofstaðir (Björn K. Þórólfsson 382; Jón Samsonarson 431).

To summarize the previous paragraphs, the sources on the authorship of Skaufalabálkur are late and contradictory but there are two common themes. One is that the same author composed Skaufalabálkur and Skíðaríma. The other is that this author worked for Björn Þorleifsson (c. 1408–1467) and Ölóf Loftsdóttir (c. 1410–1479) at Skarð, the wealthiest and most powerful people in Iceland at that time. The question for the textual scholar is whether these two claims are plausible and our answer is that they are very plausible indeed. Skíðaríma tells of the travels of the vagrant Skíði and its descriptions reveal that the author is especially familiar with the Dalir area in Iceland – where Skarð is
located. *Skaufalabálkur* and *Skíðaríma* are both unusually creative and interesting works and it is not difficult to imagine that they are the product of the same mind. A recent stylistic analysis by Haukur Þorgeirsson (2022) concludes that *Skaufalabálkur*, *Skíðaríma*, and *Bjarkarímur* [the rímur of Bjarki] have so much commonality in vocabulary, style, and themes that common authorship is the best explanation.

In the 2022 article, Haukur concluded (2022, 68) that a linguistic dating of *Skíðaríma* and *Bjarkarímur* points to the mid-fifteenth century - which fits well with composition for either Björn or Ólöf at Skarð. However, Kari Ellen Gade has argued that there are linguistic forms in *Skaufalabálkur* that indicate a dating to the fourteenth century rather than the fifteenth century. It is, then, necessary to evaluate these arguments. Gade (952) presents the case as follows:

The 603 version ... contains older linguistic forms, such as the demonstrative pronoun sjá (m. nom. sg.) ‘this’, which is uncommon after the fourteenth century, a clear distinction between the inflected dual possessive pronoun okkr ‘we two’ and the genitive of the dual okkar ‘of us two’, as well as the ending a (rather than i) in the 1st pers. sg. pres. and pret. indic. of weak verbs .... The scribe of 603 also occasionally uses the cliticised form ‘hefc’, literally ‘have-I’ (sts 30/1, 37/5), which indicates that he is copying an older exemplar which cannot date from the second half of the fifteenth century.

We will examine these linguistic traits in the order listed. Firstly, the demonstrative form sjá survived into the sixteenth century (Katrín Axelsdóttir, 192) and occurs often enough in fifteenth-century poetry. The fifteenth-century rímur cycle *Ormars rímur* [the rímur of Ormar] has six examples (stanzas I.16, I.18, I.21, II.7, III.3 and IV.19; Haukur Þorgeirsson 2013), and this is not unusual. Secondly, the possessive pronoun okkarr is still alive and well in the fifteenth century (Katrín Axelsdóttir, 416–420), and there appears to be nothing particularly archaic about its use in *Skaufalabálkur*. Thirdly, the change in the first-person ending of weak verbs from a to i is by no means a change that can be used to distinguish between fourteenth- and fifteenth-century texts. Indeed, the a-forms are still quite prominent even in the sixteenth century. As an example, *Þjófa rímur* [the rímur of the thieves], a sixteenth-century composition, has the form vissa [I knew] in stanza I.26 (AM 604 d 4to, 31v, line 22). Finally, there are no actual ‘hefc’ forms in the text of *Skaufalabálkur* in Hólsbók. The forms that are read as such by Gade are really ‘hef’ with a superscript ‘c’—a common way to abbreviate the pronoun eg and not especially archaic in this context. This spelling is not particular to *Skaufalabálkur* but rather a reoccurring aspect of the orthography of Hólsbók. In sum, none of the traits pointed out in
the Skaldic edition offer any support for a fourteenth-century dating. The linguistic evidence is consistent with the traditions which place the composition of the poem at Skarð in the mid-fifteenth century.

The Sources and the Text

The text of Skaufalabálkur is preserved in two sources, the earlier of which is the vellum manuscript Hólsbók, which has the shelfmark AM 603 4to. Hólsbók is a collection of secular poetry, mostly of the rímur genre. Björn K. Dórólfssson dated the manuscript to the middle of the sixteenth century or slightly later (5). The text of Skaufalabálkur in Hólsbók is found on the two sides of a single leaf. The text ends defectively mid-line in strophe 37. The very end of the poem was no doubt written on the following leaf, which is now lost. Hólsbók was in a more complete state when Jón Ólafsson (1705–1779) made the first catalogue of Árni Magnússon’s manuscript collection in 1730. In Jón’s days the manuscript contained not one but two fox poems and apparently neither was defective; it also contained more rímur texts than it now does. It is not clear when pages were lost from Hólsbók, but suspicion has fallen on the events of 1807, when the British bombarded Copenhagen and the Arnamagnæan manuscript collection was moved in haste to protect it (Jón Helgason 1975, 242).1

The other source preserving the poem is Rask 87, an eighteenth-century paper manuscript. The text diverges quite a bit from the older source, most substantially in including two additional strophes after what is strophe 6 in Hólsbók and another two additional strophes after what is strophe 36 in Hólsbók. The question of the relationship between the two manuscripts has bearing on any edition of the poem. If 87 is an independent source of the medieval text, then it is natural enough for the editor to use readings from it that may seem preferable on semantic, grammatical, or metrical grounds. The four additional strophes might, then, also be the work of the original author and can be included in the edition. This is the procedure used in Gade’s edition and earlier in the editions by Jón Þorkelsson (1888, 229–35; 1922–27, 154–60).

There are, however, reasons to believe that the version in 87 is not independent of Hólsbók. Rather, it was composed pen in hand by someone who was in possession of the Hólsbók text and wanted to improve on it. This was the conclusion reached by Jón Helgason in a 1924 article. Jón evaluates the textual variation in 87 as secondary and points out an especially telling variant. The scribe of Hólsbók has an unusual orthographic quirk: from time to time, he uses an ‘aa’ ligature to represent short a rather than long á. Thus, he writes the word hundsa [doggy] as ‘huñzã’. The Rask 87 text here is hund sá [saw a dog]. As Jón

1 The efforts to save the Arnamagnæan collection from British bombardment are dramatized by Arndís Þórarinsdóttir (2021), see also Katelin Marit Parsons (2022).
points out, this variant is parsimoniously explained as arising from the unusual orthography of Hólsbók. A reader of Hólsbók expecting ‘ai’ to have the normal value of á could easily misread ‘hunzú’ as hund sá.

It is, thus, likely that 87 is not an independent witness to the medieval text but derivative of Hólsbók. Proceeding on this basis, we have chosen the Hólsbók text as the basis for our edition and done our best to make sense of it. Even though Hólsbók is clearly the better witness, it has a number of obvious misspellings and a few oddities. In our Icelandic text we note any deviation from the text of Hólsbók with an asterisk. They are addressed along with other textual difficulties in notes at the end.

How close the preserved sixteenth-century text is to the composition of the fifteenth-century poet is hard to say. The poem is composed in the common Germanic alliterative metre, known in Iceland as fornyrðislag [old word metre]. Previous editors have used metrics to assist with textual criticism but we have refrained from doing so. There is little poetry in this metre preserved from this time,² so it is hard to say what would have or would not have counted as permissible. Some of the apparent liberties in the placement of alliteration or in the patterns of long and short syllables might be authorial.

For the Icelandic text of the poem, we have used normalized modern spelling as a model. This is meant to be more accessible than a diplomatic text would be and less anachronistic than normalized Old Norse spelling would be. More or less all of the phonetic changes that are acknowledged by modern Icelandic spelling had taken place by the fifteenth century — thus it is with good conscience that we write, for example, eg [I] and að [to] and verður [becomes] rather than ek and at and verðr. We have not, however, modernized any of the authentic late medieval forms of Hólsbók such as aldri [never], tög [ten of something] and leitaða [I searched] (modern Icelandic aldrei, tug and leitaði).

² For a history of fornyrðislag in Iceland, see Haukur Þorgeirsson (2010). The metre appears to have been in continuous use, but in the late Middle Ages it was not typically used for the sort of high-status poetry that would be committed to vellum.
**Skaufalabálkur – The Poem of Sheaf-Tail**

1. Hefir í grenjum gamall skaufali 
lengi búið hjá langhölu. 
Átt hafa þau sér alls upp talda 
átján sonu og eina dóttur.

Old Sheaf-Tail has lived long in 
dens with Long-Tail. All told, they 
have had eighteen sons and one 
daughter.

2. Því voru nítján niðjar skaufala, 
hunds jafningja, heldur en tuttugu, 
þar sannaðist fyrða formmæli 
að oft verður örgum eins vantar á tög.

This is why Sheaf-Tail, the equal of 
any dog, had nineteen kits rather 
than twenty. The evil one often 
leaves us one short in ten. Here the 
people’s old saying proved true.

3. Þá voru burtu börn *skaufala 
flestöll farin úr föðurgarði. 
Þó voru eftir þeim til fylgdar 
þrír yrmlingar og þeira dóttir.

By then most of Sheaf-Tail’s 
children had gone off from the 
family home. Three little runts 
and their daughter were still left 
as their company.

4. Mælti gortanni við *grenlægju, 
“Hvað skulum vinna vær til þarfa? 
Við erum orðin veyklenduð mjög 
hryggsnauð harla en *halar rotnaðir.”

Gore-Tooth said to Den-Dweller, 
“What shall we do in our need? 
Our loins have become weak, our 
backs have become very bare, and 
the hair has fallen from our 
brushes.”
5. Svarar grenlægja gömul á móti,
   “Nú *eru á burtu börn okkur roskin
   en þau ung sem eftir sitja
   og enn ekki á legg komin.

6. Þú munt heiman halda verða
   og afla bráða til bús okkars.
   Væri það til vinnu að leggja
   sem virðum má verst gegna.”

7. Mælti þanninn móðir drattala,
   “Matur er eigi meiri mér í höndum,
   hálrófubein og hryggur úr lambi,
   bógleggir þrír og banakringla.”

8. “Svo er nú liðið,” segir lágfæta,
   “loðbakur minn, langt á tíma –
   von er upp héðan veðra harðra
   en að höndum kominn haustþústur mikill.

9. Betra er nú bráða að leita,
   en þá fyrðar fé sitt geyma.
   Liggja með brúnúm lömb hvetvetna
   en á fjalli feitir sauðir.”

The old Den-Dweller answers back,
“Now that our oldest children
have gone off, those who are left
are young and not yet fully grown.

You will have to leave home to
provide meat for our household.
The task at hand is to do what
serves men most ill.”

Drag-Tail’s mother spoke in this
fashion, “I have no more food on
hand: a tailbone and the spine of a
lamb, three shoulder bones, and a
neckbone from the death-cut.”

“The year is so advanced, my
Hairy-Back,” says Short-Leg, “we
can expect hard storms from now
on; a great autumn blast is
already in the offing.

It’s better to look for meat now
than later when men are tending
to their stock. Lambs can be found
everywhere along the brows of
hills and fat sheep in the
mountains.”
10. “Sá er nú tími,” segir rebbali,
   “sem seggir munu að sauðum ganga.
Víst er alls staðar von um héðan,
mun á fjöllum nú mannferð mikil.’
   “This is the time,” says Fox-Brush,
   “when men will be going up to
round up their sheep. You can
certainly expect that from now on
there will be a lot of coming and
going everywhere in the
mountains.”

11. “Vissa eg eigi víst,” segir tófa,
   “að þú huglaust hjarta bærir.
Þú vilt bölvaður til bana svelta
afkvæmi þitt og okkur bæði.”
   “As if I didn’t know,” says the
vixen, “you have the heart of a
coward. Cursed as you are, you
want to starve your offspring and
the two of us to death.”

12. “Þú skalt ráða,” segir rebbali,
   “við mun eg leita vista að afla.
Þó hafa nornir þess um mig spáð
að mér gömlum glæpast mundi.”
   “You’ll have your way,” says Fox-
Brush, “I’ll try to find a means to
get us some food, although the
norns foresaw that in my old age I
would be lured out into some affair
that would turn out badly.”

13. Fór heiman þá fljótt dratthali
og ætlar sér afla að fanga.
Fann skjótlega fimmtán sauði
og einn af þeim allvel feitan.
   Then Drag-Tail set off quickly
from home with a plan to find
food. He soon located fifteen
sheep, one of them very fat.
14.Það var geldingur gamburlega stór grákollóttur gamall að aldri. Vendir skolli víst að honum og með tönnum tók í lagða.

It was a wether, as big as a stockman’s boast, grey and hornless, advanced in age. Foxie, sure enough, turns on him and seizes flocks of fleece in his teeth.


The contest between Foxie and the sheep then ended with Grey-Pate leaving this life. Drag-Tail makes ready to set off from there for home; he had caught a sheep for his stores.


Now, for a while, I’ll have a bit more to say about his excursion. Old Sheep-Biter came back late to the den, ravenous with an empty stomach.

17.Kallar kámleitur á konu sína, heldur hvasseygður, hunds jafningi: “ Má eg segja þér frá ferðum mínum, heldur hraklega, sem mér hugur sagði. Grime-Face, quite keen-eyed, the match of any dog, calls to his wife, “Let me tell you about my travels, all rather terrible to my way of thinking.
18. Þáð var í morgun, þá eg heiman fór; hafða eg fengið mér feitar bráðir, bundið bagga og á bak mér lagðan. Hugðumst heim flytja hann til byggða.

It happened this morning when I left home, I had got some fat meat for myself, tied it up in a sack, and slung it over my shoulder. I was intending to bring it home to the settlement.

19. Þá var mér litið í lág eina, hvar að háfættur maður hljóp kallandi. Fór með honum ferlíki mikið, kolsvart að lit, kennda eg hundsa.

Then, in a dell I happened to see where a long-legged man was running and shouting. Sprinting with him was a huge monster, coal-black in colour. I recognized it as his ‘doggy.’


He stretched out his snout, opened his eyes wide, and immediately discovered where I was skulking along. I had a pretty good idea of what was on his mind. I threw off my fine burden.

21. Hann tók á skeiði skjótt eftir mér; skundar hvatlega og skrefaði stórum. Hljóp eg frálega heldur undan; leitaða eg við lífi að forða.

He promptly began to run after me; he rushed rapidly, with great bounds. I ran off in a great hurry; I was trying to save my life.
We ran a long way along the side of a mountain, up and down, so much that it was a wonder. I found a crevice in a crag and in it, a hole. Terrified, I managed to squeeze in there.

This den was ringed about with stones. The dog could nowhere find a way in. He barked fiercely, that mighty-mawed champion, when he was not able to seize me in his teeth.

I hunkered down there, although I seemed to be in a bad fix; dejected, my eyes downcast, I was afraid of dying. The long-legs ran up to the opening toward the hole. He had a big staff that he jabbed in at me.

The thick end of the crook hit my side; I couldn't get away from it anywhere in there; three ribs were painfully broken right in two inside me by the staff of that fellow.

All in all, I was badly injured in many places by that vagrant’s pokes and the butt of his crook. The upshot was that he headed home and took away with him my whole bag.

27. Svo hafa aldri, síz eg leitaða við, mér svo tekist mínar ferðir. Það er hugboð mitt, að hóðan mun eg eiga skjótt skaplega skammt ólífað.

My travels, ever since I set out on them, had never turned out so badly. I have a foreboding that from now on, very soon, and in due course, I’ll have but a short time to live.

28. Hef eg margan heldur †hæla† feitan sauð sérlega sviptan lífi, tínt kiðlinga, en týnt lambgymbrum, gripið geldinga og gamalrollur.

I’ve taken for myself the life of many a fat sheep, plucked out lambs, killed ewe yearlings, seized wethers and worn-out old ewes.

29. Hef eg með ströndu strokið jafnlega og heima um hauga jafnan snuðrað. Bitið hef eg álar, bellt klyppingum, rifið af þönum rétt húð hverja.

I’ve made a habit of roaming the shores and always snuffled around the refuse piles of homesteads. I’ve bitten through leather thongs, damaged fleeces, ripped every hide right off the drying rack.
30. Hef eg oftlega óþarfur verið bændafólki í byggð þessi, skoðað jafnlega skreið í hjöllum, riklinga rár og rafabelti.

I have always done harm to the farmers of this settlement, have regularly checked out the drying fish on the flakes, the stakes with split halibut and their belts of fat.

31. Hef eg hentað mér hákarlslykkjur og hoggið mér hvinnasnepla. Eiga mér allir, ef eg dyl einskis, ýtar oftlega illt að launa.

I’ve taken loops of shark meat for myself and nipped off thieves’ tidbits. To be quite honest, they all have many reasons to repay me for my ill deeds.

32. Forðast kunna eg vélar gjörvallar þótt fyrðar þær fyrir mig setti. Þurfti engi þess að leita því að eg vissa vélar gjörvallar.

I knew how to avoid every single snare, even though people set them for me. No one need have tried that, because I knew all about such tricks.

33. Fannst sá engi, fyrr né síðar, hundur háfættur eða hestur í byggðum að mig á hlaupi hefði uppi. Var eg frára dýr en flestöll önnur.

No long-legged dog or horse that could catch up with me in a race was to be found, then or ever, in the settlements. I was a faster critter than almost all the others.
34. Nú tekur elli að mér sækja.    
Má eg alls ekki á mig treysta;    
farinn fráleikur, *fitskór troðnir,    
tenn sljóvgáðar en toppur úr enni.    

Now old age begins to attack me; I    
have no faith in myself at all any    
more; my speedy running is gone,    
my foot-pads worn down, my teeth    
dulled, and the tuft has fallen from    
my forehead.

35. Mun eg til rekkju reika verða;    
mér tekur verkur að vaxa í síðu.    
Svo hef eg ætlað, sjá mun dagur koma    
mér yfir höfuð minn inn síðasti.    

I’ll have to totter to bed; the pain    
in my side is getting worse. This is    
what I expected: this day, my last,    
will come down around my head.

36. Það hlægir mig, þó mun hér koma    
úr ætt minni annar verri.    
Hann mun mann gjöra margan sauðlausan    
og aldri upp gefa illt að vinna.    

One thing cheers me: another fox,    
one even worse, will come forward    
from my family here. He will make    
many a man sheepless and will    
ever give up from doing damage.

37. Bjóst þá skolli í ból sitt fara.    
Beit hann helstingi hart til bana.    
Þar mun hann verða þjófur afgamall    
líf að *láta. [Lokið er kvæði.    

Then Foxie got ready to go into his    
den. The stroke of Hel pierced him    
sharply and fatally. There he has    
to leave this life, the old thief. The    
poem is complete.
38. Hefur bálk þennan og barngælu
sett og samið Svartur á Hofstöðum
mér til gamans og mannfjörðar
mengi ófróðu mun eg nú þagna.]

I, Svartur from Hofstaðir, have composed and assembled this poem, an amusement for children, for my lazy pleasure and for the unlettered crowd. Now I will be quiet.

**Textual Notes**

Where the text in Hólsbók appears unintelligible, we have resorted to emendation. In most cases a letter has been accidentally left out and is easily restored. Eugen Kölbing, the first editor of the poem, was unaware of the version in Rask 87, but in several cases his conjectures resulted in the same text as preserved there. We have also noted when our emendations agree with those in Corpvs Poeticvm Boreale (CPB). Guðbrandur was likewise unaware of Rask 87.

We use brackets to enclose the final lines of the text which we obtain from Rask 87 rather than Hólsbók. In one case we use the crux desperationis (†) to signal that we are keeping the manuscript spelling of a word which we are uncertain how to normalize or understand.

3.2 skaufala (so Rask 87, Kölbing, CPB), ‘skaufla’ 603

4.2 grænlægu (so Rask 87, CPB), ‘grænlægu’ 603

4.6 veyklenduð: The adjective lendaður is also known from a seventeenth-century poem by Stefán Ólafsson (80), and in that case too the word hryggur occurs in the next line.

4.6 mjög (so Rask 87, Kölbing, CPB), ‘miug’ 603

4.8 halar (so Kölbing, CPB; ‘hala’ Rask 87), ‘halir’ 603

5.3 eru (so Rask 87, Kölbing, CPB), ‘er’ 603

7.5 hálrófubein: The word hálrófa is a hapax but presumably a variant of hælrófa (Jón Helgason 1924, 312) or conceivably halarófa. The cuts of meat listed here match well with Icelandic descriptions compiled in the twentieth century (see e.g., Soffia Gísladóttir 1960).
16.7 sópinn: Misread as sofinn by previous editors, but the p is clear. The same phrase occurs once in an 18th-century medical text (“þeir sem í er nálgr, eru sísvángir og sópnir,” Sveinn Pálsson 216). The Norwegian word sopen means “ravenous” and we assume, with Jón Helgason (1924, 312), that this was also the sense of its Icelandic counterpart.

24.2 þætta: We would expect third person þætti rather than first person þætta. By the time of Hólsbók, the shift from a-endings to i-endings in weak verbs was underway, and þætta may be a hypercorrection.

28.2 †hāla† feitan: This is a difficult verse. Gade (975–76) takes hāla to be the adverb “highly,” but we are not aware of any examples of that word postdating 1300. Another possibility might be to connect the word with hārōfubein (verse 7.5) in which hāl- is otherwise attested as hæl-. However, *hælafeitan would be equally unattested and obscure. Some previous editors venture *halafeitan, [with a fat tail], but this is also unattested, and the tail of Icelandic sheep are rather unimpressive. Conceivably there is some mistake in the line. An emendation to *halsfeitan [neck-fat] is conceivable and would have the virtue that a fox kills a sheep by attacking the neck. Due to the uncertainty, we have left the word in the manuscript spelling and not attempted to translate it.

31.1 hef eg hentað: The left part of the ‘g’ is faint in the manuscript, leading previous editors to misread it as ‘j’ and to construct the pseudoword *íhenta. See Jón Helgason (1924, 313).

31.4 hvinnasnapill: This is presumably the same thing as hjófasnapill, a certain part of the head of a fish (Lúðvík Kristjánsson 1985, 408, 426; Valdimar Óssurarson). There was a belief or superstition that cutting the ear off a sheep’s head would make one a thief (Soffía Gísladóttir 1960). The idea may have arisen from the ears of sheep being used for ownership marks and then, perhaps, it was transferred by some analogy to a part of a fish’s head.

34.6.fitskór (so Kölbíng, CPB), ‘fitkor’ 603: It is difficult to make any sense of ‘fitkor’ and the following word troðnir calls for it to be a masculine noun in the plural. Kölbíng’s emendation to fitskör seems like the best solution. The word fit can refer to the skin of an animal’s feet.

37.7 láta (so Kölbíng, CPB): The page in 603 ends with the letter ‘l’ and the following page is lost from the manuscript. We have supplied the final verse of this strophe as well as all the final strophe from Rask 87.
38.6 mannþurðar: Literally “man-decrease” and probably a self-deprecating reference, since composing light-hearted poems for children might be seen as an unmanly waste of time, compare words like mannleysa [coward, wretch] and òmennska [indolence].

38.7–8: The seventeenth-century Grænlands annáll by Jón Guðmundsson names the author of Skaufalabálkur as a certain Einar fóstri and gives this version of the end of the poem: “Hefur bálk þenna / og barngælur / ort ófimlegur / Einar fóstri” (Ólafur Halldórsson, 46, 252–53); “This poem, an amusement for children, was composed by the less-than-nimble Einar fóstri.”

REFERENCES


