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Domesticating Prophecy in Verse:

The Translation Strategy and Politics of *Merlínusspá*

The two poems known collectively as *Merlínusspá* and ascribed to the Icelandic monk Gunnlaugr Leifsson (d. 1218/1219) occupy a unique position within Old Norse literature. As a two-part poetic rendering of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Prophetiae Merlini*, they represent the earliest known Arthurian translations into Old Norse (Sif Ríkharðsdóttir and Eriksen 2013, 3), as well as the only known instance of a translation from Latin prose into Old Norse verse (Poole 2017a, 38; Gropper 2011, 48). At the same time, they are considered remarkably faithful translations (Poole 2017a, 44; Gropper 2011, 51; de Vries 1998, II 74–75), and they have consequently suffered from the stigma attached to works that are not 'original'. Examining the translation strategy at work in *Merlínusspá*, however, illuminates the sophisticated cultural poetics underlying the two texts. As we shall see, they can be described as 'domesticating translations' following the model established by Lawrence Venuti (2008). This self-conscious rewriting of the Latin prose *Prophetiae* as native verse prophecy can thus be set against the later translations of European verse romances into Old Norse prose commissioned by King Hákon IV Hákonarson of Norway (1204–63). In this context, *Merlínusspá* gains particular significance, not only as an intervention into Icelandic politics, but also as an engagement with verse poetics and cultural politics similar to the work of Gunnlaugr's younger contemporary Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241).

While *Merlínusspá* has benefited from two recent editions by Russell Poole (Gunnlaugr Leifsson 2017) and Susanne Horst (*Merlínusspá* 2012),[1] the two poems continue to receive comparatively little scholarly attention, with much of it devoted to their complex textual

[1] All references to *Merlínusspá* are to Poole's edition. All translations are my own.

history. The texts survive in only one copy and in a substantially damaged state (Poole 2015–18, 200–03), inserted into the Old Norse translation of Geoffrey's *Historia regum Britanniae* in the fourteenth-century Hauksbók (AM 544 4to), where they are presented in inverse order compared with the *Prophetiae*. They were most likely translated around 1200 by Gunnlaugr Leifsson, a monk at the Benedictine Abbey of Þingeyrar (see Poole 2017b), and they probably circulated independently of the *HRB* before being reinserted into the translated *Breta sǫgur* (Tétrel 2021, 351; Lavender 2006, 113). There has been debate concerning the order of the poems, and even whether they were both translated by Gunnlaugr.[2] Their most recent editor Russell Poole (2017a, 46), however, considers them 'two installments' of an entire poem. For clarity, I will follow Poole in referring to the longer poem, which renders the first part of the *Prophetiae* and is presented second in Hauksbók, as *Merlínusspá I*, and to the shorter poem as *Merlínusspá II*.

Yet as important as the distinctions between the two poems is their largely shared translation strategy. Philip Lavender (2006, 114) recognizes that: 'The translation of a prose text into poetry and, moreover, poetry that uses eddic verse forms and skaldic diction, is highly unusual and, thus, probably significant'. In this respect, the lens of translation theory can add much to previous readings by further drawing out the implications of *Merlínusspá*'s use of poetic forms to render the *Prophetiae*. This is especially relevant given that the Latin text of the *Prophetiae* was generally treated almost as reverentially as the Bible (Crick 2011, 70). In 1155, Wace famously omitted the *Prophetiae* from his Norman translation of the *HRB* (2002, 7539–40) with the justification:

> Ne vuil son livre translater
> Quant jo nel sai interpreter;
> Nule rien dire nen vuldreie
> Que si ne fust cum jo dirreie.

[2] Sveinbjörn Rafnsson (1999) argues for an order of composition that follows Hauksbók; conversely, Horst (2006) argues that the poem presented first in Hauksbók is the work of a later imitator.

> I do not wish to translate his book when I do not know how to interpret it; I would not want to say anything of them, lest it should not happen as I say.

Translating the riddling *Prophetiae* was an open act of interpretation, indeed an act of prophecy in itself, which could have been politically risky for Wace in the reign of King Henry II of England (Blacker 1996, 37). The choice to rewrite the *Prophetiae* in the tradition of Old Norse verse prophecy, 'at a time of contestation of power between chieftains and church as intense […] as that witnessed in England' (Poole 2014, 18), is therefore inherently political. It is these underlying politics that Venuti's model of domestication (2008, 14), within which 'translation serves as an appropriation of foreign cultures for agendas in the receiving situation, cultural, economic, political', can reveal.

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The translation practice Venuti terms domestication, in opposition to foreignization, entails adaptation to literary norms predominant in the language of the translation. Despite a translation's apparent faithfulness, 'the foreign text is imprinted with values specific to the receiving culture' (Venuti 2008, 40). Venuti (2008, 47) associates this approach with the translation strategy of *fluency*, which conceals the translated text's status as a translation and makes it seem to have been originally written in the translating language. This model strikingly illuminates the verse poetics, blending typically eddic metre and skaldic diction (Poole 2017a, 45),[3] that underlie Gunnlaugr's rewriting of Geoffrey's *Prophetiae*. It also goes beyond Lavender's slightly reductive assessment (2006, 124) of *Merlínusspá* as a Christian repurposing of eddic verse prophecy in the tradition of *Vǫluspá*, which largely leaves aside its

[3] The binary distinction between eddic and skaldic verse is a modern concept, and the boundary is in fact often fluid (see Clunies Ross 2005, 14; Whaley 2005, 481); it can be further complicated by a distinction between eddic and skaldic metres, content, and diction, as well as social context (see Clunies Ross 2012; Leslie-Jacobsen 2016–17).

indebtedness to skaldic poetry. In fact, Gunnlaugr's translation demonstratively draws on all aspects of contemporaneous Icelandic verse poetics to produce a *fluent* translation, deeply rooted in Icelandic history and traditional poetic forms. The resulting text acts as a cultural and political tool: impenetrable prophecies are made to seem relevant to the domestic Icelandic situation, and the decoding of historical prophecy is primarily positioned as a reading of Icelandic poetry.

Gunnlaugr Leifsson is known as the author of several Latin histories, working within the 'distinguished historiographic and hagiographic milieu' of Þingeyrar Abbey in the diocese of Hólar (Poole 2017b, 38).[4] His domesticating translation of Geoffrey's *Prophetiae* fits perfectly into this context by embedding Merlin's prophecies into Icelandic history. This begins with the use of the eddic metre *fornyrðislag*, or 'old story metre',[5] for all of *Merlínusspá I* and most of *Merlínusspá II*. Lavender (2006, 115) rightly notes that this metre is 'generically appropriate' for eddic verse prophecies like *Vǫluspá*. More broadly, however, it also ties *Merlínusspá* into highly valorized narratives of ancient history, as Hélène Tétrel (2006, 260) argues. The prologue to *Merlínusspá I* presents the prophecies as a matter, not of translation, but of ancient legends embedded in pre-existing literary traditions (1.1–4):

> 'Nú skalk flotnum, þats forðum vas,
> – hlýði fróðir mér fyrðar – segja.
>
> Now I shall tell men what once was – listen to me, wise men.

The audience is addressed with poetic *heiti*: *flotnar* 'seamen, men' and *fyrðar* 'men' (Sveinbjörn Egilsson and Finnur Jónsson 1931, 142, 163), which together with the metre immediately domesticates the prophecies. This is emphasized through the later repetition of the

[4] On Þingeyrar Abbey's place in Icelandic literary culture, see Gottskálk Jensson (2021).

[5] For a brief account of *fornyrðislag* and its 'legendary associations', see Poole (2005, 265–66); see also Fulk (2016, 255–60).

line *í sǫgum fornum* ‘in ancient stories’ (3.4, 4.4). Similarly, *Merlínusspá II* sets out to narrate prophecies *fornra minna* ‘from ancient memories’ (3.6). Although *Merlínusspá* is explicitly set in Britain, its chosen poetic form thus serves to integrate it into a legendary past framed in distinctively Icelandic terms.

In fact, Gunnlaugr translates *Merlínusspá* to slot neatly into Icelandic historiographical continuity, producing readings that occasionally puzzle editors. Notably, he expands the prophecy regarding King Arthur’s conquests. For the Latin *Insule oceani potestati ipsius subdentur, et Gallicanos saltus possidebit* ‘the islands of the ocean will come under his authority, and he will seize the passes of France’ (Geoffrey of Monmouth 2007, 145), *Merlínusspá I* (25) reads:

> Fersk undir hann foldu grœnni
> ok eyja fjǫlð í úthafi,
> Íra ok Engla ok Út-Skota,
> víðum lǫndum valskra þjóða,
> Nóregs síðu ok Norðr-Dana
>
> The green land is brought under his rule, and a multitude of islands in the outer sea, of the Irish and the English and the Outer Scots, with wide lands of the French people, the coast of Norway and of the North-Danes.

In his edition of *Merlínusspá I* (25), Poole remarks on this incorporation of Arthurian conquests that only occur later in the *HRB*, possibly drawn from a commentary on the *Prophetiae*, but cannot explain why Iceland, which explicitly figures among these conquests, is omitted. Historiographically, however, this makes perfect sense: in clarifying the phrase *insule oceani* ‘the islands of the ocean’, the translation accords with Icelandic historiography by not having Iceland settled in Arthur’s time. Although Iceland could still implicitly be included among the *eyja fjǫlð í úthafi* ‘multitude of islands in the outer sea’, it is striking that the same pattern is also found in *Breta sǫgur*, in which Norway replaces Iceland among Arthur’s conquests (see Kalinke 2015, 29–30). Gunnlaugr’s domestication produces a kind of historiographical

fluency, ensuring that *Merlínusspá* can naturally lead up to Icelandic history and thereby remain relevant to Icelandic audiences.

Yet the fluency demanded by alliterative verse also drives domestication in another way. The paratactic structure of alliterative verse does not allow for the same kind of pronominal reference as Latin prose (Poole 2015–18, 199), therefore relying on *heiti* and kennings that necessarily invoke a specific cultural framework. The prologue to *Merlínusspá I* introduces Merlin not as a prophet but as *yngva vinr* 'the king's friend' (9.5–6). Poole (2014, 24) attributes this circumlocution to the posited influence of Geoffrey's *Vita Merlini*, which depicts Merlin as a king. But as J. S. Eysteinsson (1953–57, 96–97) notes, the use of kennings recalling 'great warrior kings and vikings' is a highly conventional practice: Merlin thus appears as *verdags hǫtuðr* 'hater of the sea-day [GOLD > GENEROUS MAN]' (10.2), *fleinþollr* 'spear-fir [WARRIOR]' (11.8), or *spillir bauga* 'despoiler of rings [GENEROUS MAN]' (13.8). The kennings' conventionality does not make them meaningless. On the contrary: this choice of kennings demonstrates a self-conscious effort to further tie *Merlínusspá* into the literary tradition and historical continuity associated with its poetic form. Thus, even when closely translating the Latin text, *Merlínusspá I* renders the Latin pronoun *eius* 'his' (Geoffrey of Monmouth 2007, 141) as the mythological kenning *Týr […] Hristar* 'Týr <god> of Hrist <valkyrie> [WARRIOR]' (14.8–9).

Indeed, the residual mythological framework characteristic of Old Norse poetry becomes a key strategy to domesticate the animal allegory of Geoffrey's *Prophetiae*. The *Prophetiae*'s first symbolic animals, two *dracones dormientes* 'sleeping dragons' (Geoffrey of Monmouth 2007, 141), are translated in *Merlínusspá I* as *lindar lands* 'girdles of the land' (12.5–6) or *seil rás* 'rope of the earth' (12.7–8), kennings that are not attested elsewhere but implicitly recall the mythological Miðgarðsormr. In the same way, in *Merlínusspá I*, the pagan king Gormund, represented in the Latin *Prophetiae* by an *aequoreus lupus* 'wolf of the sea'

(Geoffrey of Monmouth 2007, 145), becomes *Fenrir sjóvar* 'wolf of the sea' (29.2). Like the Miðgarðsormr, the *heiti Fenrir* 'wolf' carries mythological connotations that seem to pre-empt Gormund's apocalyptic assault on Christianity. The *Prophetiae*'s riddling predictions are consequently subsumed to become practically an extended function of poetry; as Tétrel (2006, 264) remarks, traditional poetic form 'permet de réunir dans la même lecture le bestiaire du texte original […] et les comparants traditionnels de la kenning' ('makes it possible to combine in the same reading the bestiary of the original text and the traditional comparisons of the kenning'). What emerges is a type of prophecy deeply rooted in domestic poetic practice. As a result, even as the *Prophetiae* move past Geoffrey's own time and cease to neatly map onto real historical events, they still present the illusion of being decipherable through poetic imagery. Their vagueness is what keeps the prophecies potentially applicable and politically dangerous, as Jean Blacker (1996, 39) argues; and the key to understanding *Merlínusspá*'s riddling predictions and applying them to Icelandic history seems to lie in understanding all facets of Icelandic poetry.

Most obviously, *Merlínusspá* seems indebted to eddic verse prophecy. Jan de Vries (1998, II 76) primarily identifies parallels with *Vǫluspá* and *Grípisspá*, which he rather patronizingly takes to illustrate 'die Unselbstständigkeit dieses dichtenden Mönches' ('the lack of independence of this versifying monk'). Lack of independence is of course the point – and as Poole (2017a, 45) argues, most of these supposed parallels are likely the effect of 'a general eddic style'. In two instances, however, *Merlínusspá II* seems to draw directly on *Vǫluspá*'s depiction of *ragnarǫk* (2014, 44):[6]

Brœðr munu berjask	ok at bǫnum verðask,
munu systrungar	sifjum spilla;
hart er í heimi,	hórdómr mikill,
skeggǫld, skalmǫld,	skildir ro klofnir,

[6] Although Sveinbjörn Rafnsson (1999, 415) suggests that *Vǫluspá* may be more recent than *Merlínusspá*, most scholars agree that the opposite is more likely.

vindǫld, vargǫld, áðr verǫld steypisk;
mun engi maðr ǫðrum þyrma

Brothers will fight each other and kill each other, sisters' sons will stain the kinship bond; hard it is in the world, great fornication, axe-age, sword-age, shields are cloven, storm-age, wolf-age, before the world sinks; no man will spare another.

This stanza parallels passages in *Merlínusspá II* as it skips forward in the *Prophetiae* to describe the end of the world, including the only other occurrence of the compound *vargǫld* in the Old Norse corpus: *víg ok vélar, vargǫld ok kǫld* 'battles and treacheries, wolf-age and cold' (51.5–6). The same stanza may also have inspired the translation of the Latin *Nesciet pater filium proprium* 'the father will not know his own son' (Geoffrey of Monmouth 2007, 157) in *Merlínusspá II* (54.1–4) as:

Verst es í heimi; veitat sonr fǫður;
slíta þeir sifjum svá synir við feðr

It is worst in the world; the son does not know the father; thus sons stain the kinship bond with fathers.

As a result, Merlin's apocalyptic predictions are framed within what Lavender (2006, 117) calls 'culturally familiar terrain', creating an eschatological vision following established poetic patterns.

At the same time, *Merlínusspá* is clearly not to be read as mythology, but as mythological verse explicitly situated within Christian history. This entails an adaptation for contemporary Icelandic audiences by domesticating the ambiguously pagan terminology of the *Prophetiae*. *Merlínusspá I* (29.5–10) renders *Delebitur iterum religio* 'religion will be destroyed again' (Geoffrey of Monmouth 2007, 145) as:

Verðr kristnibrot of kyni þjóðar;
þó munu sjalfir síðar nøkkvi
enskir lýðir allir skírask.

There is a breakdown of Christianity among the kindred of the people; but the English people will themselves later all be baptized.

The passage expands on the Latin *Prophetiae* to preserve the continuity of Christian history. But its primary importance lies in translating the general term *religio* 'religion' specifically as *kristni* 'Christianity', which establishes a pattern for all further occurrences of the term. Equally, the Latin *Tonantis* 'of the Thunderer' (Geoffrey of Monmouth 2007, 147), which can designate God but is also the traditional epithet of Jupiter, is translated as the kenning *buðlungs himins* 'of the king of heaven' (36.2), which can only designate the Christian God and coincidentally eliminates any possible resonances with Þórr; similar translations occur throughout for the term *Tonans*. Other explicit references to non-Christian religions are suppressed, both by omitting the Latin text's mentions of Venus (Geoffrey of Monmouth 2007, 149, 151), and by largely eschewing mythological kennings invoking major gods (see Tétrel 2006, 263). *Merlínusspá II* goes even further by explicitly describing Merlin as a Christian prophet: *Kærr vas hann kristnu kynni þjóðar* 'he was dear to the Christian family of peoples' (2.5–6). At every instance, the translation brings the prophecies closer to Christian Icelandic society. For all its mobilization of an eddic verse form, *Merlínusspá* presents historical prophecy and a legendary past made accessible through a resolutely contemporary, Christian poetic lens.

That the purpose of this is not to Christianize eddic prophecy, but to present all aspects of an already Christian poetic art as a key to Icelandic history, becomes apparent through Gunnlaugr's ostentatious display of typically skaldic mythological diction. This goes far beyond a simple 'interest in traditional skaldic subject matters', as Lavender (2006, 116) has it. Both poems amplify battle scenes to insert poetic descriptions, with no Latin sources, into the prophecies. A comparison of the repetitive battles shows that they essentially function as skaldic set pieces to display the translator's poetic skill. Thus, *Merlínusspá I* (65) reads:

Svífr it hvassa	hagl tvíviðar
– hnígr hǫlða lið –	hart af strengjum.
En geyst hinig	gaflok fara;
megut Skǫglar ský	við skotum halda.

> The sharp hail of the bow [ARROWS] flies – the troop of men falls – hard from the strings. And javelins violently travel this way; the clouds of Skǫgul [SHIELDS] cannot withstand the shots.

This passage is then practically echoed and amplified in *Merlínusspá II* (34.5–12):

> Gnýr es á glæstum Gǫndlar himni
> ok í hǫrðum hlam Hlakkar tjǫldum.
> Erut skjólsamar Skǫglar kápur;
> hrýtr hagl boga hlíf í gegnum.
>
> There is a clashing on the shining heaven of Gǫndul [SHIELD] and a thudding on the hard awnings of Hlǫkk [SHIELDS]. The capes of Skǫgul [MAILSHIRTS] are not protective; the hail of bows [ARROWS] pierces through armour.

As Poole (2018, 275) notes, the mythological kennings employed are all 'highly conventional and predictable'. There is no need to suppose that Gunnlaugr needed to reclaim kennings involving valkyries for a Christian poetry that had already thoroughly assimilated them. They could as well be described with Christopher Abram's assessment (2014, 50) of the ostentatiously mythological poem *Øxarflokkr* by the significantly earlier Christian *skáld* Einarr Skúlason (fl. 1153): as 'an extremely self-conscious and learned exercise in traditional kenning-composition'. But beyond simply providing an aesthetic flourish, *Merlínusspá* uses these traditional literary forms to establish its authority and historical relevance. This learned exercise in prophetic composition demonstrates that Merlin's prophecies can only be understood through all the aspects of contemporary Icelandic verse that Gunnlaugr so demonstratively deploys.

In this respect, *Merlínusspá* parallels the twelfth- or thirteenth-century *Hugsvinnsmál*. This widely attested, and highly influential,[7] Icelandic gnomic poem transposes the

[7] The influence of *Hugsvinnsmál* on Old Norse literature is extensively, if sometimes tenuously, documented by Hermann Pálsson (1985).

hexametrical Latin *Disticha Catonis* into Old Norse *ljóðaháttr*,[8] a form associated with eddic wisdom poetry which it notably shares with *Hávamál* (see Larrington 1993, 104; Schorn 2011, 144–45).[9] Like *Merlínusspá*, it deliberately deploys a traditional form to transmit the advice of a *heiðinn maðr* 'heathen man' (*Hugsvinnsmál* 2007, 1.5), no longer identified with Cato but integrated into Iceland's pagan past. But it also operates within an explicitly Christian contemporary framework. Not only does it consistently omit references to pagan gods (see Bauer 2009, 40–41); it also transforms the late antique *Disticha Catonis*' equivocal *Si deus est animus nobis ut carmina dicunt* 'if God is a spirit, as songs tell us' (1952, I 1.1) into a straightforward exhortation *at göfga æztan guð* 'to worship the highest God' (*Hugsvinnsmál* 2007, 17.3). Most importantly, like *Merlínusspá*, it openly relies on the authority of Icelandic verse traditions. Carolyne Larrington (1993, 116) notes that *Hugsvinnsmál* goes so far as to contradict its source to insist on the high cultural value of poetry. Where the *Disticha Catonis* (1952, III 18.2) assert that *miranda canunt, sed non credenda poetae* 'poets sing of things to be marvelled at but not to be believed', *Hugsvinnsmál* (2007, 102.1–3) instead reads:

> Gamansamlig ljóð skaltu af greppum nema
> ok mörg fræði muna
>
> Entertaining songs you must learn from poets and remember much knowledge.

The verse translator can thus claim the poet's traditional role as a 'conduit for the transmission of this valuable wisdom', as Brittany Schorn (2011, 141) has it. Together with *Merlínusspá*,

[8] For a brief account of *ljóðaháttr* and its frequent pairing with *fornyrðislag*, see Poole (2005, 268–69) and Fulk (2016, 260–62).

[9] The relationship between *Hugsvinnsmál* and *Hávamál* is not unlike that between *Merlínusspá* and *Vǫluspá*, in that they tend to be seen as closely connected, and the translation is occasionally argued to predate the 'native' poem; see notably von See (1999). In the case of *Hugsvinnsmál*, Carolyne Larrington (1993) convincingly argues for the priority of *Hávamál*; see also McKinnell (2007, 76–91) and Wills and Würth (2007, 360).

Hugsvinnsmál might therefore be said to belong to a distinct tradition of very consciously poetic verse translation in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland.

Merlínusspá and its translation strategy must then also be seen in the wider context of the literary development charted by Guðrún Nordal (2001, 118), through which skaldic poetry became 'the tool with which the grammarians and learned men of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries forged a link between native traditions and classical learning'. In fact, following Venuti's model, *Merlínusspá*, like *Hugsvinnsmál*, goes even further by domesticating the Latin *Prophetiae* and presenting them as *part of* native Icelandic traditions. The prophecies therefore draw their authority not from the Latin text, but from their roots in ancient history and poetic tradition, which also serve to emphasize their historical relevance to contemporary Icelandic audiences. Furthermore, the domestication of Geoffrey's increasingly impenetrable allegories in the form of eddic and skaldic poetry makes them seem, in Lavender's words (2006, 124), 'tantalizingly decipherable'. Yet the power to decipher them ultimately rests with the poet who uses *Merlínusspá* to display his multifaceted poetic prowess. *Merlínusspá II* refers to itself as a *ljóðborg* 'fortress of song', a questionably refreshed manuscript reading that Poole emends to *ljóðbók* 'song-book' (4.2). Both terms are *hapax legomena*, and a case can be made for either of them.[10] What is important is that both highlight the importance of the prophecies' poetic form. Gunnlaugr's mastery of verse poetics conspicuously signals his ability to deploy verse prophecy as a powerful historical, cultural, and political tool, the concrete applications of which will become apparent in comparison with later Old Norse translation projects.

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Poole's emendation of *ljóðborg* to *ljóðbók* suggests a comparison with the *Strengleikar*, Norwegian translations of Marie de France's Anglo-Norman *Lais* commissioned by King

[10] Notably, Horst's edition (*Merlínusspá* 2012) follows previous editors in maintaining the reading *ljóðborg* as a kenning referring to the poem.

Hákon Hákonarson of Norway in the quarter-century following Gunnlaugr's death. A similar term is proposed as a name for the *Strengleikar* in the collection's prologue (1979, 4): *bok þessor er hinn virðulege hacon konongr let norræna or volsko male ma hæita lioða bok* 'this book, which the worthy King Hákon had translated into Norse from the French language, may be called Book of Songs'. Yet this *ljóðabók* is fundamentally different from the domesticated *Merlínusspá* in verse. The *Strengleikar* (1979, 4) explicitly reference their foreign sources: *gærðo skolld i syðra brætlande er liggr i frannz lioðsonga* 'poets in Brittany, which is in France, composed songs'. Furthermore, these songs are not translated in verse, but in the alliterative and repetitive 'courtly' prose style typical of the translated *riddarasögur* (Goeres 2019, 78). This style, which Stefanie Würth (1998, 131) describes as 'eine Annäherung an die poetische Form der französischen Vorlagen' ('an approximation of the French sources' poetic form'), serves as a constant reminder of the *riddarasögur*'s origins in foreign romance and their distinction from native historical genres. In this regard, the *Strengleikar* reflect a translation practice that is diametrically opposed to the domestication of *Merlínusspá*. They tend towards what Venuti (2008, 15) calls foreignization: translation that intentionally disrupts pre-existing cultural values and 'signifies the differences of the foreign text', even though it can only foreignize the text by using linguistic tools that are ultimately domestic.

This is not to say that the *Strengleikar* fulfil Venuti's idealized notion of foreignization. As part of a translation programme commissioned by Hákon 'to Europeanise his own court' (Eriksen 2007, 99; see also Irlenbusch-Reynard 2011; Sif Ríkharðsdóttir 2012), they are as much cultural tools as the domesticating *Merlínusspá*. As Venuti emphasizes, however, domestication and foreignization do not operate as a binary but reflect broad ethical attitudes to texts; and the *Strengleikar* certainly reflect a foreignizing practice in constructing 'a certain image of the foreign that is informed by the receiving situation but aims to question it by drawing on materials that are not currently dominant' (Venuti 2008, 19–20). In characteristic

courtly style, the ancient Bretons featuring in the *Strengleikar* (1979, 4) are positioned as a source of foreign learning, *þui at þæir varo listugir i velom sinom glægsynir i skynsemdom. hygnir i raðagærðom vaskir i vapnom hæverskir i hirðsiðum* 'because they were skilled in their arts, clear-sighted in their reason, wise in their counsels, valiant with weapons, courteous in courtly customs'. The *Strengleikar* thus draw on a vernacularized *translatio studii*, a transfer of authoritative learning that, as Rita Copeland (1991, 121) notes, is marked by 'a linguistic rupture with the *antiqui*'. The text consequently appears as a mediator of foreign authority, largely separate from native historical traditions, which then allows it to instrumentalize *translatio studii* in order to legitimize innovation (see Angerer 2022). In this way, foreignization is integral to Hákon's project of effecting political and cultural change.

This new thirteenth-century translation strategy for romance stands in stark contrast to the domestication of earlier Icelandic verse translations like Gunnlaugr's rendering of the *Prophetiae Merlini*. Instead of mediating foreign authority, *Merlínusspá* consolidates existing cultural authority by blending the voices of Merlin the prophet and Gunnlaugr the poet. Although Sveinbjörn Rafnsson (1999, 382) distinguishes between the presentation of *Merlínusspá II* as an originally poetic prophecy and *Merlínusspá I* as a later poem about prophecy, both texts explicitly have Merlin speaking in verse. *Merlínusspá II* introduces the prophecies with the phrase *nú skal brag kveða* 'now the poem shall be recited' (4.8) and refers to itself as *folkstafs fornu kvæði* 'the ancient poem of the people-stave [LEADER]' (62.3–4). Similarly, *Merlínusspá I* creates the effect of direct speech by including the reporting clause *kvað bjóðr bragar* 'said the offerer of poetry' (21.3). It is true that *Merlínusspá I* (94.7–10) reflects more fully on its form, and to some extent differentiates between Gunnlaugr and Merlin, by appending Gunnlaugr's remarks that:

> ek mynt hafa mál at hætti,
> þeims spár fyrir spjǫllum rakði

I have shaped the matter after the style in which he recited prophecies in words before.

But Gunnlaugr's domesticating claim to preserve Merlin's *háttr*, a broad term generally meaning 'manner' but also 'verse form' (*ONP*, *s.v.*; see also Cleasby and Vigfusson 1874, 244), maintains a sense of poetic equivalence. *Merlínusspá*'s judicious use of literary form makes one of prophet and poet.

The historical and moral authority Gunnlaugr arrogates to himself through poetry is implicit in the interpretive framework provided at the end of *Merlínusspá I*, which Sveinbjörn Rafnsson (1999, 414) calls 'varnarræða fyrir [*Merlínusspá II*] og form þess' ('a defence of *Merlínusspá II* and its form'). The fact that it is also a defence of poetic form gets somewhat lost when Lavender (2006, 124) quite rightly describes the framework as 'a Christian hermeneutics'. *Merlínusspá I* does set Merlin in the tradition of Daniel and David's biblical prophecy rather than *Vǫluspá*: *sem fyr hǫ́num fyrðar helgir* 'like holy men before him' (96.9–10). Importantly, however, the mention of Daniel and David is followed in *Merlínusspá I* (97) by a defence of the form of prophecy:

> Virði engi þat vitlausu,
> þótt hann hoddskǫtum heiti gæfi
> viðar eða vatna eða veðrs mikils
> eða alls konar orma eða dýra.
> Táknar eðli talðrar skepnu
> spjǫrráðanda spjǫll eða kosti.
>
> Let nobody think this foolish, though he gives treasure-chieftains [KINGS] the names of trees or of lakes or of a great storm or of all kinds of serpents or beasts. The nature of the recounted creature signifies the flaws or virtues of the spear-wielders [WARRIORS].

This passage effectively defends allegorical prophecy at the same time as the poetic use of *heiti* and kennings. The underlying proposition is rather more radical than Lavender's notion (2006, 122) of repositioning the imagery of eddic poetry as a key to divine revelation. Instead, as an *ars poetica et prophetica*, *Merlínusspá I* suggests a fundamentally poetic hermeneutics through which both past and future may be understood, and within which historical and moral signification is controlled by the Christian poet.

As a defence of, ultimately, the timeless political power of traditional Icelandic poetry, this interpretive framework presents a striking parallel with Snorri Sturluson's slightly later prose *Edda*. *Merlínusspá I* (95.7–10) proposes to teach its audience:

> hverr fyrða sé framsýnna hǫ́ttr
> mǫ́l at rekja, þaus menn vitut
>
> What the style of prophetic men is in unfolding matters which men do not know.

In this instance, Poole (2009, 313) may be right to note that the term *háttr* 'relates not to metrical form […] but to figurative language'. Yet given the importance of poetic form to Gunnlaugr's translation strategy, in this context the word cannot be separated from its secondary significance of 'verse form'. Gunnlaugr's defence of poetic prophecy is then not dissimilar to Snorri's later efforts to preserve the verse forms and mythological terms underlying skaldic poetry (1998, I 5):

> En þetta er nú at segja ungum skáldum þeim er girnask at nema mál skáldskapar ok heyja sér orðfjǫlða með fornum heitum eða girnask þeir at kunna skilja þat er hulit er kveðit
>
> But these things must now be told to young poets who desire to learn the language of poetry and add to their vocabulary with ancient *heiti*, or who desire to understand that which is hidden in speech.

Snorri, too, is keen to present traditional poetic forms as a way of decoding the past, which similarly puts the poet in a position of historical and political power. As Kevin J. Wanner (2008, 159) argues, Snorri's *Edda* attempts to restore the importance of poetry as a form of cultural capital by demonstrating its 'historic contribution to the legitimation of Scandinavian kings and the memorialization of their reigns'. In light of Poole's suggestion (2009, 309) that Snorri's *Háttatal* may partly emulate *Merlínusspá*, it is tempting to think that Snorri found a model there in a more general sense. Gunnlaugr's poetic prophecy emerges as a statement of the Christian *skáld*'s importance in determining the meaning of past and future history, and the place of worldly leaders within it.

This is particularly significant in the political context of Iceland around 1200. Poole (2014, 19) argues that the *Prophetiae* were brought to Iceland as 'a weapon in current controversies about the primacy of ecclesiastical versus secular authority': *Merlínusspá* may have been directly commissioned by Guðmundr Arason (1161–1237), whose tenure as Bishop of Hólar was marked by repeated clashes with Icelandic chieftains (see also Sverrir Jakobsson 2018, 202–05; Helgi Þórlaksson 2007, 146; Orri Vésteinsson 2000, 174–78). The fact that Gunnlaugr's domesticating translation, as a targeted act of cultural politics, enhances its political potential even further lends additional weight to this supposition. The explicit poetics of *Merlínusspá I* especially highlight the Christian poet's role as the arbiter of history and prophecy, which may also explain why the poem articulates the question of fame remarkably transparently. The Latin prophecy regarding Arthur's fame is couched in highly metaphorical terms: *In ore populorum celebrabitur, et actus eius cibus erit narrantibus* 'he will be celebrated in the mouth of the peoples, and his deeds will be food to those who recount them' (Geoffrey of Monmouth 2007, 145). In contrast, Gunnlaugr's translation in *Merlínusspá I* (27) unpacks this sentence to produce a very straightforward reading:

> Hann munu tígna tungur lýða;
> sá mun gramr vera gumnum tíðastr.
> Ey mun uppi ǫðlings frami
> ok hans hróðr fara með himinskautum
>
> The tongues of men will honour him; that ruler will be the most famous of men. The lord's prowess will always be remembered, and his glory will travel to the corners of heaven.

It comes as a clear reminder of the poet's role in making historical judgements and propagating fame, and of the power the prophetic poet holds over worldly rulers throughout history. Poole (2018, 280) states that Gunnlaugr 'constitutes himself partly as prophet, partly as chronicler'. But having concentrated historical and poetic authority in himself, Gunnlaugr also openly constitutes himself as chronicler of both past and future. The domestication of *Merlínusspá* and

its sustained engagement with verse poetics thus appears, like Snorri's interest in the cultural capital of poetry, 'overwhelmingly political in nature' (Wanner 2008, 158).

While none of the translated prophecies map directly onto contemporaneous Icelandic events, they give rise to the explicitly homiletic conclusion of *Merlínusspá II*, once more without precedent in the Latin *Prophetiae*. This is accompanied by a switch to *kviðuháttr*, which is not an eddic metre but one *Merlínusspá II* shares with poems traditionally classified as genealogical, like *Ynglingatal* and *Háleygjatal*. Kate Heslop (2022, 45–46), however, has recently reassessed *kviðuháttr* as a form emphasizing the *skáld*'s agency in the construction of poetic memory, set against the 'deep past' of *fornyrðislag*.[11] In *Merlínusspá II*, the passage to this more skaldic metre thus highlights the transition to the Christian poet's moral conclusions and his power to relate them to his audience. In content, these are partly gnomic in character, and in fact Hermann Pálsson (1985, 60) identifies a potential borrowing from *Hugsvinnsmál* in *Merlínusspá II*'s pronouncement that *Skrjúpt es líf lýða barna* 'frail is the life of the children of men' (65.1–2). This parallels *Hugsvinnsmál*'s statement that *Brigt er lýða líf* 'fickle is the life of men' (2007, 48.6). But since this gnomic phrase does not very closely translate the Latin *Cum dubia incertis versetur vita periclis* 'since doubtful life is overthrown by uncertain perils' of the *Disticha Catonis* (1952, I 33), it may equally be a variant on a popular idiom. More than its origins, what is important is that this piece of gnomic advice in *Merlínusspá II* derives its force from the role of the poet constructed throughout the preceding verse prophecies. His very position as a Christian poet, conversant in the idiom of both prophecy and memory, gives him political and moral authority and allows him to encourage his audience not to trust in earthly life.

[11] On the form of *kviðuháttr* and its difference from *fornyrðislag* more generally, see also Heslop (2022, 18).

There is once again a stark contrast with the later *Strengleikar*, in which Hermann Pálsson (1985, 49) also finds parallels with *Hugsvinnsmál*. In one instance, *Hugsvinnsmál* (2007, 35) warns:

> Af annars dauða væntu aldrigi,
> at þér gagn geriz;
> aldrlagi sínu ræðr engi maðr;
> nær stendr hölðum hel.
>
> Never expect to benefit from another's death; no man controls his fate; death is close to men.

This is echoed in the *Strengleikar*, but this time drawing on a fundamentally different type of authority. The gnomic statement occurs in a moralizing codicil added to the translated *Equitan* by *sa er þessa bok norrænaðe* 'he who translated this book into Norse' (*Strengleikar* 1979, 78). The translator concludes: *Girnizc ok ængi at auðga sec af annars dauða. þui at marger dœyia þœir fyrr illum dauða er oðrum æfna ok ætla skiotan dauðan* 'and no one should wish to enrich themselves through another's death, for many die sooner of an evil death who prepare and plan a swift death for others' (*Strengleikar* 1979, 78). This is of course part of a wider pattern of moralizing in the *Strengleikar* identified by Andrew Hamer (1994). Yet crucially, the authority underlying the translator's moral injunction is now explicitly that of foreign sources and imported knowledge. Tellingly, the passage ends with quotations from Augustine, the Bible – emphasized by the assertion that *Sua sannar hœilagt bokmal* 'thus affirms the holy Latin' (*Strengleikar* 1979, 80) – and two Latin distichs. In the *Strengleikar*, the translator's authority derives from the ostentatiously multilingual, foreignizing practice through which he reproduces the sources of his knowledge for Hákon's Norwegian court.

Not so in *Merlínusspá*'s homiletic conclusion: the role that carries authority here is much more that of the poet, learned in Icelandic verse traditions and arbiter of men's future

fame, than that of the translator. In *Merlínusspá II* (64.1–4), the poet directly addresses his audience in the first-person plural in the manner of a preacher:[12]

> Sjá*m* við synð ok svikaráðum
> ok alls kyns illum verkum
>
> Let us eschew sin and treacherous counsels and all kinds of evil deeds.

This injunction is extremely general, but as with the opaque prophetic language of the poem, it is within the poet's power to apply it to specific situations. This is not the foreignizing recourse to external authority deployed in Norwegian translations as a source of innovation. This is an authority that, through domestication, naturally proceeds out of the traditions of Icelandic poetry and historiography. And it is perhaps no coincidence that, in the case of the disputes between Bishop Guðmundr and the chieftains of Northern Iceland, the force of this authority was subsequently validated by the bishop's successful memorialization as *Guðmundr inn góði* 'Guðmundr the Good' through the poetry and sagas produced by Þingeyrar monks in the following centuries (see Gottskálk Jensson 2021, 10; Nordal 2001, 100–10). Gunnlaugr's translation of Geoffrey's *Prophetiae* thus constitutes a self-conscious engagement with verse poetics and cultural politics that allows the learned Christian *skáld* to assume a position of historical and moral authority over both past and future.

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Overall, a reading of *Merlínusspá* as a domesticating translation reveals how this largely neglected poem engages with Icelandic verse poetics to reinforce the poet's historical authority. The effectiveness of this strategy is reflected in the two extant mentions of *Merlínusspá* in medieval manuscripts of the translated *Breta sǫgur*. Additionally, these two manuscripts also

[12] A very similar usage occurs in the roughly contemporaneous Old Norwegian Homily Book: the *Sermo ad populum* closes on the exhortation *siom við houuð-syndum* 'let us eschew deadly sins' (*Gamal norsk homiliebok* 1931: 73).

illustrate the relevance of Venuti's model as a more general way of approaching Old Norse translations. *Merlínusspá* is, as previously noted, included in the shorter redaction of *Breta sǫgur* in Hauksbók, and it is also mentioned, but not included, at the same point in the longer redaction of *Breta sǫgur* in AM 573 4to. Interestingly, these two redactions of a lost original translation themselves broadly align with a domesticating, historical practice and a foreignizing, romance style. As Stefanie Gropper (2014, 235) notes, the Hauksbók version that includes *Merlínusspá* has likely been reworked to fit traditional modes of historiography, while the redaction in AM 573 4to is much closer in style to the translated *riddarasögur*. Although *Breta sǫgur*'s own complex textual history should not be oversimplified, the inclusion of *Merlínusspá* in Hauksbók and its exclusion from AM 573 4to does suggest that the categories of domestication and foreignization have, to some extent, distinct generic functions.

The fourteenth-century Hauksbók, an encyclopaedic compilation largely in the hand of the Icelandic lawspeaker Haukr Erlendsson (c. 1265–1334), reveals a broad interest in history, both of Iceland and the world.[13] Its text of *Breta sǫgur* prefaces *Merlínusspá* with the following statement (*Hauksbók* 1892–96, 271):

> siðan sagþi M*er*lin*vs* langt f*ra*m v*m* k*onvng*a æfi *ok* morg on*n*vr stortiðinði þa*v* er en eru eigi f*ra*m ko*m*in. h*er* eft*ir* hef*ir* Gvðlavgr mvnkr ort kvæði þ*at* e*r* heit*ir* M*er*lin*vs* spá
>
> Then Merlin spoke at length about the lives of kings and many other great events, which have not yet come about. Based on this, Gunnlaugr the Monk composed a poem that is called *Merlínusspá*.

This presentation confirms the successful domestication of *Merlínusspá*: it is framed as a historical poem primarily concerned with kings' lives that, as Tétrel (2021, 337) notes, derives its historical authority from Gunnlaugr rather than Geoffrey's *Prophetiae*. Its inclusion in the manuscript then furthers the domestication of this redaction of *Breta sǫgur*, bringing the

[13] The compilation of Hauksbók is notably discussed by Sverrir Jakobsson (2007) and Rowe (2008).

translated text closer to the prosimetrum of historical sagas, which characteristically use skaldic verse as corroboration.[14] There is still an element of generic ambiguity, associated with *Merlínusspá*'s status as a *ljóð*: Judy Quinn (1998) finds that this term is typically used to introduce prophetic verse in the *fornaldarsögur*, which might have provided another impetus for the poem's inclusion in the Hauksbók text. Haukr's historical encyclopaedia, however, contains both historical sagas and *fornaldarsögur*, and so the overall effect of *Merlínusspá*'s inclusion in Hauksbók still maintains a certain level of adaptational consistency.

Conversely, *Merlínusspá* is conspicuously absent from the redaction of *Breta sǫgur* in the fourteenth-century AM 573 4to. In this manuscript, *Breta sǫgur* is followed by the courtly *Valvens þáttr*, translated from Chrétien de Troyes' romance *Le Conte del Graal*, which suggests a romance reception context (see Kalinke 2015, 11). *Merlínusspá* is mentioned at the same place in the narrative, in a passage similar to that found in Hauksbók, which describes it as *id stærsta af kvædi* 'the greatest of poems' while adding: *ok kunna margir menn þat kvædi* 'and many men know that poem' (*La Saga des Bretons* 2021, 516). Again, this suggestion that the poem may have circulated widely in oral form testifies to Gunnlaugr's poetic success, validating his emphasis on the poet's role in shaping history. However, its relegation to the sphere of common knowledge also serves as a justification to keep the poem separate from *Breta sǫgur*, maintaining the redaction's similarity to the *riddarasögur*: these do not take the form of prosimetrum and are generically distinguished from historical sagas by their 'courtly' style (Würth 1998, 135).[15] A domesticating, historicizing translation like *Merlínusspá* may

[14] On the function of verse in historical sagas, see particularly Stavnem (2014, 93), O'Donoghue (2005, 11) and Harris (1997, 142).

[15] In fact, the only clear exception to the prose form of the *riddarasögur* occurs in the *Strengleikar*, with the insertion of the two Latin distichs at the end of *Equitan* (Harris 1997, 136). Another slightly less overt recourse

have seemed out of place in the context of a text that was closer to the foreignizing *riddarasögur*, products of a later romance translation programme that soon came to dominate translated literature in Old Norse.

As an enterprise in historicizing poetic translation, *Merlínusspá* thus seems to have been quite successful. Gunnlaugr's poem maintains and even enhances the political potential of Geoffrey's *Prophetiae* while adapting them for Icelandic audiences. Like the skaldic poetry that Snorri Sturluson attempted to restore to its position of cultural importance, however, the Icelandic domesticating practice that Gunnlaugr deployed to assert his poetic authority was later displaced by the foreignizing cultural capital of the prose translations undertaken for King Hákon Hákonarson of Norway (see Wanner 2008, 146). Ultimately, *Merlínusspá* remains a striking testament to an early culture of Icelandic verse translation, experimenting with historical authority and cultural politics, that differs radically from the later Norwegian translations of Arthurian romance.

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to poetic forms can be found in *Parcevals saga* and *Valvens þáttr*, which use rhyme to emphasize their didactic significance; see Bornholdt (2011, 102–03) and Kalinke (2002).

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