

1987

## Sir Walter Scott and Eyrbyggja Saga

Julian D'Arcy

Kirsten Wolf

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

D'Arcy, Julian and Wolf, Kirsten (1987) "Sir Walter Scott and Eyrbyggja Saga," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 22: Iss. 1.  
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol22/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu).

*Julian D'Arcy and Kirsten Wolf*

**Sir Walter Scott and *Eyrbyggja Saga***



Sir Walter Scott's interest in Old Norse literature and history is a well-known fact and frequently commented on, to a greater or lesser extent, by many scholars and critics. Scott had clearly developed this enthusiasm by the time he was a student in Edinburgh, for in 1790 he read a paper on Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic lore to the Literary Society, and in the following year he presented a paper on Scandinavian mythology to the Speculative Society.<sup>1</sup> Once he had passed his exams he spent the autumn evenings of 1792 poring over Bartholin's book on Danish antiquities.<sup>2</sup> Scott also became a subscriber to the Arnamagnaean editions of the sagas, published in Copenhagen from 1770 onwards, and throughout his life he avidly read and collected books on ancient Scandinavian history and culture. Indeed, by the time he died in 1832, his library at Abbotsford contained an impressive number of the most important works on Old Norse subjects then currently available.

The influence of this interest in ancient Scandinavia on Scott's own work has also been traced and examined in great detail, especially by Paul Robert Lieder whose painstaking and thorough research has established

---

<sup>1</sup>John G. Lockhart, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott* (Edinburgh & London, 1837), I, 173, 176.

<sup>2</sup>Edgar Johnson, *Sir Walter Scott: The Great Unknown* (London, 1970), p. 90.

that Scott's knowledge of Old Norse mythology, history, and literature was especially based on the works of Thomas Bartholin, Olaus Magnus, and Torfaeus,<sup>3</sup> from which he drew much incidental material for his poems and novels (often as explanatory footnotes), particularly references to Valkyries, spae wives, magic swords, werewolves, dragons, dwarves, berserkers, and runic spells and inscriptions. Scandinavian material is especially evident in such poems as *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, *The Lady of the Lake*, *The Lord of the Isles*, *Rokeby*, and *Harold the Dauntless*, and also in his novels *Ivanhoe*, *The Antiquary*, and *The Pirate*; the last named is the most obviously influenced by Scott's knowledge of Old Norse literature, with its melodramatic spae wife, Norna, and plot elements borrowed from *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Eirik's saga*.

Although Lieder's meticulous piece of research is almost fifty pages long and has many detailed examples, it is still not exhaustive. As F.W.J. Heuser points out in a review of the article, there is no mention at all of Scott's *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1830), which contains many references to Old Norse superstitions, particularly as regards dwarves, fairies, and ghosts.<sup>4</sup> There is yet a further lapse in Lieder's otherwise excellent pioneering work; at one point in his article (p.44) he claims that he has "reserved for fuller discussion" four of Scott's works which "deal fundamentally with, or are influenced by, Scandinavian writings": his review of Herbert's *Miscellaneous Poetry*, the *Abstract of Eyrbyggja-Saga* [sic] (hereafter *Abstract*), *Harold the Dauntless*, and *The Pirate*. As far as the *Abstract* is concerned, however, the "fuller discussion" turns out to be nothing more than a very short paragraph which merely states that Scott used Thorkelin's Old Norse/Latin edition of *Eyrbyggja saga* (hereafter *Eyrbyggja*) as his source, and that he abbreviated and re-told the saga "in his own language" (p.46). There is no attempt to criticize or evaluate Scott's method of selecting and translating his material.

Scott's re-telling of *Eyrbyggja* has, in fact, been treated rather curiously by both Old Norse and English Literature scholars. In a very long, interesting and detailed article on Icelandic studies in eighteenth and nineteenth century Scotland, for example, Edward J. Cowan comments on Scott's well-known enthusiasm for Scandinavian literature and that "Scott's only published exercise on the sagas is the long abstract of *Eyrbyggja saga* appearing in Weber and Jamieson's *Illustrations of Northern Antiquities*, 1814."<sup>5</sup> Again, apart from referring to this whole

---

<sup>3</sup>Paul Robert Lieder, "Scott and Scandinavian Literature," *Smith College Studies in Modern Languages*, I (1920), 8-57.

<sup>4</sup>F.W.J. Heuser, *Modern Language Notes*, XXXVII (1922), 303-7.

<sup>5</sup>Edward J. Cowan, "Icelandic Studies in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Scotland," *Studia Islandica*, XXXI (1972), 121.

work as a "magnificent volume" (p.122), there is no further comment on Scott's success or otherwise concerning his presentation of the Old Norse saga. As for his biographers, Lockhart (III, p.114), Grierson,<sup>6</sup> and Johnson (p.435) each make a single reference to the *Abstract*, and Buchan<sup>7</sup> fails to mention it at all. This is all the more surprising when it is borne in mind that Scott's version of *Eyrbyggja* has often been referred to as the first English edition of an entire Old Norse saga.<sup>8</sup> Two scholars in particular have commented on the importance of this point. Edith Batho claims that the *Abstract* "shows the first clear recognition in English of the essential and eternal qualities of the sagas,"<sup>9</sup> and John Simpson calls it the "one single but crucial instance" in which Scott introduced to English readers "an important new aspect of the literature and life of medieval Iceland."<sup>10</sup> Significantly enough, however, although Batho makes a detailed analysis, in the same article, of Scott's rendering from Latin and Old Norse of the story of Gunnar Helming (in *Letters of Demonology and Witchcraft*), there is no discussion at all on the content and style of Scott's version of *Eyrbyggja*. Simpson has much more to say about it, in general terms at least. "Scott tells the story with gusto," he informs us, "and his remarks on it are usually very much to the point" (p.310). Simpson even goes so far as to claim Scott as a "social realist" who saw "the thematic unity of the saga as lying in its depiction of a society in process of development."<sup>11</sup> Simpson is full of admiration for his critical insights into the saga, particularly his awareness of Snorri Godi's unifying role and the social and political implications of his personality and behavior.

That such a character, partaking more of the juriconsult or statesman than of the warrior, should have risen so high in such an early period argues the preference which the Icelanders already assigned to mental superiority over the rude at-

---

<sup>6</sup>Herbert Grierson, *Sir Walter Scott, Bart.* (London, 1938), p. 111.

<sup>7</sup>John Buchan, *The Life of Sir Walter Scott* (London, 1932).

<sup>8</sup>If James Johnstone's translations of selected passages from Old Norse sagas are disregarded (e.g. *Anecdotes of Olave the Black* [1780] and *Haco's Expedition to Scotland* [1782]).

<sup>9</sup>Edith Batho, "Scott as Mediaevalist," in *Sir Walter Scott Today*, ed. by H.C. Grierson (London, 1932), p. 153.

<sup>10</sup>John Simpson, "Scott and Old Norse Literature," in *Scott Bicentenary Essays*, ed. Alan Bell (London & Edinburgh, 1973), p. 300.

<sup>11</sup>John Simpson, "Eyrbyggja Saga and Nineteenth Century Scholarship," *Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference at the University of Edinburgh, 1971*, (London, 1973), p. 381.

tributes of strength and courage, and furnishes another proof of the early civilisation of this extraordinary commonwealth.<sup>12</sup>

Many of Scott's interpolations in his *Abstract* are indeed astute comments on various aspects of early medieval Iceland. He makes a particular note of "the high honours in which the female sex was held in that early period of society" (481), and later cites Thordis's divorce from Bork as an example of such (482). As a lawyer Scott was also clearly impressed by Icelanders' frequent resort to long and complex litigation in attempts to solve disputes:

Joined to the various instances of the Eyrbyggja-Saga of a certain regard to the forms of jurisprudence, even amid the wildest of their feuds, it seems to argue the extraordinary influence ascribed to municipal law by this singular people, even in the very earliest state of society. (509)

Scott also makes some shrewd and probably accurate remarks about the conversion of Iceland to Christianity in the year A.D. 1000:

As this was the third attempt to preach Christianity in the island, it seems probable that the good sense of the Icelanders had already rejected in secret the superstitions of paganism, and that the worship of Thor had declined in the estimation of the people. (501)

Both Batho and Simpson make one further claim, however, for the importance of Scott's *Abstract*: that it was working on this saga in the autumn of 1813 which later gave him the inspiration to complete a piece of his own imaginative prose, begun and abandoned twice before, which dealt with the history and society of his native land. This prose work was nothing less than his first novel, *Waverley*, published in 1814.

And if, to use Dr. Saintsbury's expression, Scott is the father as Jane Austen is the mother of the later novel, we may be doing no more than justice to the author of *Eyrbyggja* in recognizing him as one of the grandparents. (Batho, p.156)

Simpson enthusiastically agrees with Batho's suggestion, calling it a "brilliant scholarly aperçu," and arguing that, although one must probably apply to it the Scots verdict of 'not proven,' it remains, as a theory, "an attractive one surely" ("Scott and Old Norse Literature," p.312).

The interesting point about both Batho's and Simpson's praise for Scott's *Abstract*, however, is that it is almost exclusively centered on Scott's *comments* on the saga (*i.e.* his inserted observations) and not on the actual translation and redaction of the saga itself. Thus, although Simpson correctly sees Scott as "a *critic* [emphasis added] capable of seizing upon the essential qualities of one of the Sagas of the Icelanders" ("*Eyrbyggja Saga*," p.377), he makes no assessment of Scott's English

---

<sup>12</sup>Sir Walter Scott, *An Abstract of the Eyrbyggja-Saga, in Illustrations of Northern Antiquities*, ed. H. Weber and R. Jamieson (Edinburgh, 1814), p. 512. All further page references are to this edition.

version of *Eyrbyggja*. In view of these claims for the importance of Scott's *Abstract*, therefore, both as a valuable early nineteenth-century introduction, for readers of English, to Old Norse sagas, and as a vital stimulus in encouraging Scott to become a novelist, a more detailed examination of Scott's abbreviation and translation of *Eyrbyggja* would seem called for.

To a twentieth-century reader familiar with Old Norse sagas in general and *Eyrbyggja* in particular, Scott's *Abstract* will almost certainly be a disappointment. It has many careless and sometimes crass errors and the general narrative of the saga is distorted by Scott's somewhat arbitrary selection of material. The translation itself is written in a rather ponderous and over-elaborate Latinate English which generally fails to emulate or even suggest the more straightforward and pithy style of a saga. Moreover although some of Scott's interpolations and comments are shrewd and interesting, others reveal a complete misreading or misunderstanding of the text. The tone is set in the very opening line of the *Abstract* in which he refers to Iceland as "still subject to the dominion of Norway" (477) in 1264, whereas in fact Iceland had only totally and finally submitted to the Norwegian crown in 1262. Scott's geographic knowledge of Iceland also left much to be desired, for in one of his first footnotes he refers to Thorsness, where some of the episodes of *Eyrbyggja* take place, as being part of "Gold-brynge Sysself" (478), *i.e.* on the Reykjanes Peninsula, whereas, of course, Thorsness is on the Snaefellsness Peninsula, a completely different part of the country!

Lieder, Batho, and Simpson have all pointed out that although Scott claimed to have some slight knowledge of Old Norse, he invariably relied upon Latin translations for the Old Norse material he used in his works. Thus errors in a Latin translation could and did lead Scott into error and he was sometimes prone to make "linguistic howlers" (Simpson, "Scott and Old Norse Literature," p.304). Scott also had the tendency to quote from memory without re-checking his sources—with sometimes disastrous results. Both Batho and Simpson have analyzed his badly garbled version of Gunnar Helming's story and how this was a result of a faulty memory and a confusion of texts (Simpson, "Scott and Old Norse Literature," pp.304-5); Batho, pp.143-51). In the case of the *Abstract*, however, Scott has no real excuse for the number of errors he makes; several of its passages are verbatim translations of the saga, so he clearly had Thorkelin's Old Norse/Latin edition in front of him, and Thorkelin's Latin translation of *Eyrbyggja* is, on the whole, fairly accurate, though it does have at least one error which Scott unfortunately incorporated into his *Abstract*.

There are in fact very few direct translation errors (*i.e.* word-for-word renderings) in the *Abstract*, and these are not very important since they do not affect the general sense of the saga. They are a result, presumably, of carelessness and a lack of revision. Thus there are nine men all told who set off from Helgafell to kill Arnkell, according to the saga (XXXVII,

188/9),<sup>13</sup> whereas Scott has Snorri Godi *plus* nine men (499). In the saga, Thorodd the Tribute-Trader is drowned in Breidafjord "off Enni," a headland (LIV, 274/5), whereas Scott says that he was drowned "crossing the river Enna" (507). Bjorn Asbrandsson holds a knife to Snorri's chest in the saga (XLVII, 250/51), but, according to Scott, he holds it to his throat (503). Thorgunna the Hebridean bequeathes to Thurid her scarlet cloak (LI, 262/3), which Scott describes as purple (504). Furthermore, Thorgunna is attributed with "beautiful chestnut hair" in the saga (L, 258/9), but Scott describes her as having "a profusion of black hair" (502). In this instance, however, Scott has been misled by Thorkelin, who translated "jarpur" as "fuscus," and Scott transmitted this mistake into his *Abstract*. Other inaccuracies, though perhaps not direct translation errors, include Scott's reference to the ghosts at Frod River as "goblins" (509), and his insistence on calling Thrand Stigandi a former berserker (510) when the saga specifically states that he was a former sorcerer (LXI, 306/7). Nor was it Barna-Kjallak who disputed the territory of Thorsness with Thorstein Thorolfsson (480), but Kjallak's son Thorgrim (IX, 20/21). Scott has the Thorbrandssons refusing to allow Arnkell to cross their land with the body of his father (498), whereas in the saga they simply refuse to help bury Arnkell's father (XXXIV, 176/77).

Most of these mistakes seem to be the result of carelessness or haste, and, again, for the most part they make little difference to the general meaning of the saga. There are other errors, however, which are far more misleading. Scott makes the assumption, for example, that as Snorri's mother had re-married, "the tutelage of Snorro [sic] had devolved upon Borko [sic] the Fat" (481). This is a misrepresentation of the relations of the two men, for in fact, as Scott has either forgotten or ignored, the saga clearly states that Snorri was sent to Alptafjord to be fostered by Thorbrand (XII, 30/31). Later in the *Abstract*, Scott deprecates Snorri's violent and underhand methods in his feud with a rival chieftain, Arnkell. "For, although a priest, he [Snorri] was not in any respect nice in his choice of means on such occasions" (499). But this reveals that either Scott was ignorant of the nature and role of a *god*, the heathen Icelandic chieftain/priest, or else he was guilty of an anachronism, for Snorri's quarrel with Arnkell took place several years before Iceland was officially converted to Christianity or Snorri himself had taken holy orders (XXXVII, 190/91 *ff*). Perhaps an even more astonishing example of how careless and inaccurate Scott could be can be found in his re-telling of the brawl at Helgafell, at that time the home of Bork and Thordis. Eyjolf the Grey arrives on a visit with his retinue and announces that he has finally succeeded in killing the outlaw Gisli Sursson, the brother of Thordis, and

---

<sup>13</sup>Grimur J. Thorkelin, ed. and trans., *Eyrbyggja-Saga* [sic] (Copenhagen, 1787). All further chapter and page references to *Eyrbyggja* are to this edition. The chapter divisions are usually exactly the same in more recent English translations of the saga.

the murderer of her first husband. Scott describes Bork as “indifferent” to the death of Gisli (481), even though the saga explicitly states that “this was good news to Bork” (XIII, 36/37). Even worse errors are to follow. In the saga Eyjolf and his men take their seats at the table, laying their weapons on the floor; Thordis comes to serve them gruel, but as she approaches Eyjolf she drops the spoon; stooping to pick it up, she seizes Eyjolf’s sword instead and plunges it into his thigh. Uproar follows, as Bork strikes Thordis and Snorri pushes him away and shields her; Eyjolf and his men have to be restrained, such is their anger. Bork immediately grants Eyjolf self-judgment, and the latter awards himself substantial compensation before leaving (XIII, 36/37). Scott, however, reports the scene as follows:

Borko...received him [Eyjolf] joyfully, and commanded his wife to make him good cheer. While she obeyed his commands with undisguised reluctance, Eyjulf [sic] chanced to drop the spoon with which he was eating; as he stooped to recover it, the vindictive matron, unable to suppress her indignation, snatched his sword and severely wounded him ere he could recover his erect posture. Borko, incensed at this attack upon his guest, struck his wife, and was about to repeat the blow, when Snorro, throwing himself between them, repelled his attack, and placing his mother by his side, announced haughtily his intention to protect her. Eyjulf escaped with difficulty, and afterwards recovered from Borko a fine for the wound he had sustained....(481-2)

Bork’s second attempt to strike Thordis and Snorri’s haughtiness are Scott’s invention, and his statement that Eyjolf escaped with difficulty contradicts the saga. Moreover, the whole sequence of events in the stabbing is badly garbled; indeed, the way Scott relates the incident suggests it was rather an unusually harsh response to some sloppy table-manners than a cunningly envisaged attempt at revenge.

It is a little mystifying as to how Scott could make such a muddle of what is perhaps one of *Eyrbyggja*’s most well-known scenes. The only feasible answer (apart from a poorer knowledge of Latin than has hitherto been supposed) would seem to be extreme haste in composition and a complete lack of revision. However, perhaps Scott’s carelessness can be attributed to another factor: a lack of interest in this part of the saga. This hypothesis is not quite as arbitrary as it seems, for immediately after the garbled version of the brawl at Helgafell comes Scott’s detailed re-telling of the rivalry and feuding between two sorceresses and their families, primarily over horse theft (483-88). Scott makes no errors in this part of the story (except for one, to be mentioned later) which is at times a verbatim translation of the saga (XVI and XVIII-XX). As Simpson has pointed out (“Scott and Old Norse Literature,” p. 310), Scott seems to revel in descriptions of supernatural events, as is even further apparent in his detailed accounts of the rather fantastic story of Styr’s two Swedish berserkers (489-93) and his long rendering of the mysterious death of Thorgunna and the subsequent hauntings at Frod River; the ghosts are eventually banished, to Scott’s delight and admiration, by a court of law



established in the very house itself (501-509). What really must be questioned here, however, is the very way Scott has selected his material from the original *Eyrbyggja*, for, as anyone familiar with the saga will realize, the *Abstract* has some surprising, if not serious, omissions. There is no mention at all, for example, of the bitter feud between Vigfus of Drapuhlid and Snorri Godi (XXIII-XXVII), and the long and bloody dispute between the Thorbrandssons and the Thorlakssons, including the saga's two pitched battles at Alptafjord and Vigráfjord, is summarily dismissed in a mere ten lines (500). The re-occurring story of Bjorn Asbrandsson's adulterous affair with Thurid of Frod River, his voluntary exile, and final appearance as a Red-Indian chief in America (XXIX, XLVII and LXIV) is relegated to a footnote (503). Such drastic reductions from the main body of the saga led Scott into other difficulties, as can be seen in his rendering of the quarrel between Arnkell and Snorri over Krakness Wood. Arnkell's father had once given the wood to Snorri, and according to the saga (XXXV-XXXVII) once his father is dead, Arnkell reclaims the wood, and in an ensuing skirmish one of Snorri's slaves is killed. Snorri also loses the subsequent litigation, but bribes a man to try to murder Arnkell, an attempt which fails. Snorri and his men finally attack and kill Arnkell the following year. Scott, however, has the following:

After the death of Thorolf, Arnkill [sic] engaged in various disputes with the pontiff Snorro for the recovery of the woods of Krakness... Nor was Snorro for a length of time more successful in his various efforts to remove this powerful rival...and practised repeatedly against Arnkill's life by various attempts at assassination (499)

Scott then goes on to describe in detail, as in the saga, how Arnkell is finally surprised and killed. The saga's one skirmish, single court case, and one assassination attempt, however, have been multiplied by Scott into "various disputes...various efforts...practised repeatedly." This is clearly because Scott has omitted from the *Abstract* some earlier feuding between Arnkell and Snorri, and thus feels obliged to make up for this in the last fatal dispute; but the result is a gross distortion of the chain of events between the death of Thorolf and the killing of Arnkell.

Such omissions and distortions seem even less defensible when one realizes just how much of the *Abstract* is devoted to the legendary and supernatural episodes listed earlier. Moreover Scott does not always comprehend all the implications of the supernatural elements he deals with. Before beginning the story of the rivalry between Katla and Geirrida, for example, he writes: "our annalist has not left the scene altogether unvaried" and that magic and the supernatural are "an invariable part of the history of a rude age" (483), thus suggesting that the incidents about to be related are little more than conventional pieces of light relief and typical examples of medieval credulousness. He thus apparently fails to appreciate that the primary importance of the episodes is not the ingenuity or

entertainment value of the women's magic, but the way in which they embroil influential families and factions in a deadly dispute. Scott does make a brief reference to the fact that the rivalry between the two witches brings about a homicidal feud, but then reveals his lack of interest or understanding of the relevant genealogical details by attributing one of the women to the wrong family, and misspelling it to boot (484). It could well be argued, therefore, that Scott's *Abstract* gives rather a distorted view of *Eyrbyggja*, in that it has detailed descriptions of legendary and supernatural events, whilst some of the more interesting personalities of the Snaefellsness community and the causes and consequences of important social alliances and feuds are simplified, drastically reduced, or even completely ignored. Indeed as a version of *Eyrbyggja*, and as the first complete example in English of the narrative contents of an Icelandic family saga, Scott's *Abstract* is not as convincing, representative, or accurate as it might have been.

In addition to the questionable selection of material, the *Abstract* also has many stylistic weaknesses. Scott's complete dependence on Thorkelin's Latin translation of the saga is evident in the predominantly Latinate diction and syntax of his English. The rather terse and straightforward Old Norse prose is thus rendered in a grammatically intricate and abstract language which bears little relation to the original tone and style of the saga. The rather blunt and heated exchange between Thorbjorn the Stout and Thorarin the Black, when the former is demanding to search the property of the latter for his stolen horses (XVIII, 56/57), is rendered by Scott thus:

This Thorarin refused, alleging that neither was the search demanded duly authorised by law, nor were the proper witnesses cited to be present, nor did Thorbjorn offer any sufficient pledge of security when claiming the exercise of so hazardous a privilege. (484)

The tense confrontation of the saga has become a long and formal exposition in indirect speech. Many similar examples can be found throughout the *Abstract*; indeed at times it seems almost perverse the way Scott frequently insists on using an unnecessarily stilted Latinate vocabulary instead of a more readable and fluent English. Horses are thus "reposed" rather than rested (485), and when Styr tells his berserkers to build a sheep-shed, Scott has him order them to "construct a house for the reception of my flocks" (491-2). Such a style can easily result in farcical verbosity, as in Scott's description of the berserkers' tiredness and weakness after their strenuous efforts:

They were extremely exhausted, as was common with persons of their condition, whose profuse expenditure of strength and spirits induced a proportional degree of relaxation after severe labour. (492)

Scott does, of course, use a more natural, if not colloquial form of English in the *Abstract*, but it is generally marred by his frequent return to a highly Latinate diction and ponderous syntax, and thus fails completely to give a

reader with no knowledge of Old Norse at least some intimation of the sometimes pithy style of the original, or indeed of any Icelandic saga.

A further irritation to modern readers familiar with Old Norse sagas may be the inconsistency with which Scott anglicizes Old Norse names. In the case of men's names, for example, he usually takes the nominative masculine singular (second declension) of Thorkelin's Latin version, minus the -us ending: Thorolf, Thorbrand, Thorgrim, etc. But in some cases he arbitrarily adopts the dative/ablative form, thus Snorro, Borko, and Haco; in other cases he uses no particular system at all: Ospakar, Thorer, and Oluf. It must be stated in Scott's defense, however, that even today there is more than one anglicized form for many names, and that some of the versions used by Scott were the generally accepted English adaptations of Old Norse nomenclature at that time, especially the -o ending.<sup>14</sup> More exasperating, perhaps, is Scott's seemingly habitual lack of attention to detail, in this case the misspelling or confusion of proper names; thus Alptafiord is later written Altifiord (480; 499), and Braidawick, Bradwick (480; 503). The poet Thormod Vifilsson is inexplicably called Thormoda Ulfilsson (500), and Thorlef Kimbi on one page becomes Thorolf Kimbi on the next (499; 500). Moreover Eyjolf the Grey is referred to at least twice in one paragraph as Eyjulf (481-2). Geirrida is recorded as belonging to the Kialakan family (484), which is, presumably, a gross misspelling of Kjallak, and erroneous in any case. The bull which kills Thorodd Thorbrandsson is spelled Glæser and Glæsir (498; 511).

Some of these errors and inconsistencies may be charitably attributed to haste rather than ignorance, but Scott has little excuse for the way in which he renders some of the Old Norse verse in the *Abstract*. Scott was certainly impatient if not contemptuous of the skaldic form of poetry:

It seems to have been the object of the poet to convert every line into a sort of riddle, for the exercise of the ingenuity of the hearer, who was thus obliged to fight his way from one verse to another, having for his sole reward, the pleasure of penetrating mystery and conquering studied obscurity. (Quoted in Batho, p.152)

This lack of sympathy and understanding is reflected in Scott's English versions of some of the verses of *Eyrbyggja* which appear in his *Abstract*. Old Norse poetry was based on stressed patterns of alliteration and assonance and a complex use of metaphors called kennings. In one or two verses Scott manages to suggest at least some of the stylistic features of the originals, as in the following example, with its dramatic rhythm, strong alliteration, and even a hint of a kenning:

---

<sup>14</sup>See Frank E. Farley, *Scandinavian Influences in the English Romantic Movement* (Boston, 1903). Examples of various forms of anglicized Old Norse names can be found throughout this work.

From me the foul reproach be far,  
 With which a female waked the war,  
 From me, who shunned not in the fray  
 Through foemen fierce to hew my way;  
 (Since meet it is the eagle’s brood  
 On the fresh corpse should find their food,)  
 Then spared I not, in fighting field,  
 With stalwart hand my sword to wield;  
 And well may claim at Odin’s shrine  
 The praise that waits this deed of mine.

(485-6)

Most of Scott’s other skaldic verses are not so successful, however, and are hardly reminiscent of Old Norse poetry at all. His rather free translations tend to convey the very general sense of the verses, but his use of simple imagery and English metrical and end-rhyme forms leads to some incongruity; the highly complex, harsh, and chant-like poems of *Eyrbyggja* are, in the *Abstract*, turned into rollicking Border ballads or ditties:

No feeble force, no female hand,  
 Compels me from my native land;  
 O’er-match’d in numbers and in might,  
 By banded hosts in armour bright,  
 In vain attesting laws and gods,  
 A guiltless man, I yield to odds. (488)

Oh, whither dost thou bend thy way  
 Fair maiden, in such rich array,  
 For never have I seen thee roam  
 So gaily dressed so far from home...(492)<sup>15</sup>

This simply gives a false impression of the nature and delivery of Icelandic skaldic poetry, a rather unfortunate error in a work intended as an introduction to Old Norse literature.

Before coming to final conclusions about the style and content of Scott’s *Abstract*, a brief glance must be made at the claims for its vital influence on Scott’s own narrative art. Edith Batho first noted that “there still remains something remarkable” in Scott’s turning to prose fiction “immediately after he had been engaged in an intensive study of one of the most striking of the sagas,” and comes to the conclusion that

---

<sup>15</sup>For the Old Norse originals of all these verses see Thorkelin: XVIII, 62, 64; XXII, 102; XXVIII, 134.

"*Eyrbyggja* may well have been the stimulus" for Scott's becoming a novelist (p.155). She further supports her argument elsewhere by drawing attention to the fact that "the general resemblance between the *Waverley* novels and the sagas is obvious, in the combination of the heroic with comedy and plain downright realism."<sup>16</sup> Simpson fully agrees with Batho's theory and gives it further implicit support by positing a "close literary kinship" between Scott and the author of *Eyrbyggja* as social realists who "bore truthful and unflinching witness to the most crucial social changes" in their local or national communities ("*Eyrbyggja Saga*," pp.377-8). Both Batho and Simpson reluctantly admit, however, that their hypothesis cannot be proved. Not the least of its drawbacks is that Scott himself never acknowledged any relationship between his *Abstract* and *Waverley*; indeed he categorically stated that *Waverley* was mostly inspired by Maria Edgeworth's novels on Irish society and manners. But there are yet other factors in Scott's literary and personal life in the years 1813-14 which would effectively undermine, if not totally refute, Batho and Simpson's theory.

In the first place, Scott's turning to prose fiction was not, perhaps, such a radical change as it seems, for this involved no new developments in Scott's choice of subject matter; Scott was already famous as a *narrative* poet rather than a lyrical one, and many of the plot, character, and thematic elements of his novels were already present in his earlier poems, many of which were, in effect, novels in verse. Furthermore Scott had actually begun *Waverley* twice before, in 1805 and 1810, but had abandoned it because of a lack of encouragement and his continuing success in another genre. Success is here the key word, for another crucial factor in Scott's becoming a novelist was the emergence of a brilliant rival: Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* had appeared in 1812 and had been an instant and stunning success; it was to be followed by a string of best-selling verse romances. Scott's *Rokeby*, on the other hand, published in December 1812, although it sold well, was by Scott's former standards of popularity a relative failure. Scott was too discerning and honest a critic to deny Byron's greater poetic genius, and "at the back of his head he knew that his vogue had gone" (Buchan, p.108). He went on to complete *The Lord of the Isles* the following year, but by mid-1813 he had "already bidden farewell to poetry as the staple of his life" (Buchan, p.109). As the word "staple" might suggest, there is one further point to take into consideration: money. It may be regarded as somewhat tasteless to bring financial matters into literary criticism, but in Scott's case it is not altogether unusual, not the least because it is a generally accepted view that the poorer quality of Scott's later novels was a direct result of overworking in his attempts to clear ever-increasing debts, especially after the collapse of

---

<sup>16</sup>Edith Batho, "Sir Walter Scott and the Sagas: Some Notes," *Modern Language Review* XXIV (1929), p. 411.

the Constable and Ballantyne publishing and printing companies. Scott had in fact faced a bankruptcy crisis once before, precisely in the year 1813, the very year he saw his reputation as a poet overshadowed by Byron's and thus "beheld a large part of his occupation gone" (Buchan, p.106). The fate of the Ballantyne printing and publishing firm, in which Scott was involved, hung in the balance between May and September of 1813, and was only finally saved by Scott's desperate appeal to the Duke of Buccleuch for a personal guarantee to a very considerable loan.<sup>17</sup> Scott was then able to breathe freely again, but he was nonetheless heavily in debt and with many other financial obligations and anxieties: his brother Tom's family was dependent on him and he had committed himself to further land purchases and extensive improvements to his house at Abbotsford. At this opportune moment in time he rummages in an old writing desk in search of some fishing tackle—and finds the abandoned manuscript of the first chapters of *Waverley*. The need for money and to re-establish his literary reputation (if only anonymously) would almost certainly have encouraged him to have completed and published *Waverley*. As Edgar Johnson (p.429) so aptly expresses Scott's probable state of mind: "Perhaps a prose romance would do better than another *Rokeby*." A whole series of events, literary, personal, and financial, therefore, contributed to the publication of Scott's first novel—not least the remarkable chance by which the lost manuscript was found. All of which would seem to suggest that, attractive though Batho and Simpson's hypothesis might be, the most likely explanation of the completion of *Waverley* within nine months of the writing of the *Abstract* is simply sheer coincidence.

It may, perhaps, be unfair to be so negative about Scott's *Abstract*, as there are, in fact, some positive things to say about it, as indeed Batho and Simpson have already shown. Bearing in mind the limitations of Old Norse scholarship in the early nineteenth century, Scott's effort is certainly admirable; some of his critical insights into the saga have even foreshadowed more recent twentieth-century views of *Eyrbyggja*. Moreover Scott surely deserves credit for supporting Weber and Jamieson's idea for a book on Germanic and Old Norse literature and culture, and for being instrumental in persuading Ballantyne's and Longman's to publish *Illustrations of Northern Antiquities*, not least by adding his *Abstract*—and prestigious name—to the project. Doubtless, too, many of Scott's contemporaries, especially those with little or no knowledge of ancient Scandinavia, would have found it interesting and enjoyable. To modern readers, however, particularly those who are acquainted with Icelandic medieval sagas, the extent of Scott's errors and inaccuracies in the *Abstract* are only too obvious, and the work, as a whole, must be regarded as a somewhat garbled and misleading version of *Eyrbyggja*. Interest and enthusiasm are

---

<sup>17</sup>For details of this financial crisis see Johnson, pp. 412-8.

always commendable, but, unfortunately, they are no substitute for knowledge and precision. The claims for the *Abstract's* meriting further attention as a pioneering work in Old Norse studies and as an inspiration behind Scott's emergence as a novelist, therefore, must regrettably be rejected. For both Old Norse and English Literature enthusiasts, Sir Walter Scott's *An Abstract of the Eyrbyggja-Saga* must simply remain an interesting literary curiosity.

*University of Iceland*

*University of Wisconsin*