

In Praise of *divinatio*. The Value of “True Errors” and Metrical Heuristics

ABSTRACT: Quest'articolo sostiene che, nel comune discorso sul metodo ecdotico, l'importanza della congettura, o divinatio, sia stata spesso sottovalutata, laddove si tende a conferire una centralità sempre maggiore alla pura stemmatica. Nonostante la stemmatica goda all'apparenza di una maggiore “scientificità”, si rileva che i risultati raggiunti per divinatio sono spesso più solidi. Per sua natura, tuttavia, questo metodo risulta efficace più nell'individuazione degli errori che non nella loro correzione. Se in una prassi filologica “di vecchio stampo” questo poteva considerarsi un limite, il presente studio sostiene che insufficiente riconoscimento è stato attribuito alla semplice individuazione degli errori, al di là dell'eventuale emendazione. Lo studio affronta, inoltre, le potenzialità dell'analisi metrica a fini ecdotici, prendendo in considerazione in modo particolare il corpus poetico germanico di più antica attestazione.

1. IN PRAISE OF *DIVINATIO*

This article focuses on the relative merits of stemmatological versus conjectural criticism of early texts, as well as the capacity of both to identify “true” errors, meaning readings that are inherently at odds with the likely intentions of the author. The preconditions for performing textual criticism vary considerably between traditions and types of text, and I therefore focus on my own field of expertise – early Germanic and especially Old Norse poetry – leaving it to my readers to contemplate potential implications for the traditions they know best. My main concerns are four, the first two of which apply to textual criticism in general. I would argue: 1. That conjectural reconstruction is unduly marginalised in the mainstream discourse on textual criticism, and 2. That the identification of “true” errors, which can only be done through conjecture, should be seen as an important task, independent of reconstruction. In addition to these two points, the following two pertain to the study of early Germanic poetry in particular. I would suggest: 3. That metre is an underexploited resource for textual criticism, and 4. That metre is too often understood as a set of rules equally applicable to all poems

in the “same” metre.

In this article, I use the term *divinatio* in the way Paul Maas employed it (Maas 1960, §§ 15-16)¹. Other terms in common use are, for instance, *emendatio ope ingenii* and *conjectural emendation*, but these refer to emendation alone, not the entire process from detection of error to emendation. One of my key claims is that the detection of errors is a useful endeavour irrespective of emendation, and since Maas’ term encompasses both it is adopted here².

2. TEXT-CRITICAL CHALLENGES IN THE EARLY GERMANIC POETIC CORPUS

The tools of textual criticism are indispensable for the study of the early Germanic poetic corpus, where scribal misunderstandings are legion. In West Germanic, the poetic corpus is the main literary attraction to scholars. In Old Norse, poetry provides our *only* literary sources for the period c. 800–1150 apart from runic inscriptions. In other words, the most central portions of early Germanic literature up to c. 1150 cannot be responsibly studied without recourse to textual criticism.

A crucial challenge for performing textual criticism on this corpus is that, apart from skaldic poetry, most early Germanic poetry is preserved in only one or two manuscripts, which does not allow the scholar to apply stemmatological principles. The situation is aggravated by the fact that the main discourse on textual criticism has increasingly narrowed the scope of the discipline to stemmatology alone. One need only compare the titles of classics such as Maas’s *Textkritik* (first ed. 1927) and Pasquali’s *Storia della tradizione e critica del testo* (1934) to the now standard *Handbook of Stemmatology* (2020). Already in Maas, however, non-stemmatological methods are treated only in passing and assigned the name *divinatio*, clearly setting them apart from the “scientific” enterprise of stemmatology.

3. STEMMATOLOGY VERSUS *DIVINATIO* IN THE MAINSTREAM DISCOURSE

The advances of stemmatology are real, having to a large extent been spearheaded by Italian philologists. Still, if one consults a few editions of Greek and Latin texts, it becomes evident

¹ Or, at least, this is one possible understanding of his use of the term. Consider the following formulations: «[...] so muß versucht werden, sie durch *divinatio* zu heilen [...]» (MAAS 1960, § 15) and «[...] die Begründung der durch *divinatio* vorausgesetzten Fehler [...]» (Maas 1960, § 16).

² It should be noted that the term is more often used of emendation alone and not of the whole process. Maas’ usage is thus somewhat at odds with the mainstream. See GRAFTON (2019).

that editors often base their choices on non-stemmatological considerations. Perhaps more noteworthy still is the fact that in the most “classical” handbook of them all, Maas’ *Textkritik*, *divinatio* plays a very subordinate role in the description of the method (Maas 1960, §§ 15–16), whereas it dominates the collection of practical examples (chapter *E. Beispiele*). The theoretical discourse thus does not reflect the practical realities of many editors of Greek and Latin, for which the method was originally designed. For editors of early Germanic poetry, the majority of texts are found in only one or two witnesses, meaning that the stemmatological method is not applicable at all. This results in a paradox: even though textual criticism is of crucial importance to the study of Germanic poetry, scholars editing such poetry often have little to gain from the main discourse on textual criticism. R. D. Fulk and Haukur Þorgeirsson in particular have taken important steps towards establishing a scholarly debate on how textual criticism applies to this corpus, but as yet, there has been little communication between the mainstream and this more specialised discourse (e.g. Fulk 1996, 1997, 2016; Þorgeirsson 2016, 2020, 2023). I believe that both may benefit from a degree of cross-fertilisation. This article constitutes such an attempt, while also presenting some observations that I have found wanting in previous scholarship, notably on the independent value of detecting errors.

Achieving a more balanced treatment of stemmatology versus *divinatio* poses some challenges, since while the principles of stemmatology can be described in a coherent fashion, the preconditions for well-informed *divinatio* vary from case to case. For this reason, only a few general principles can be established, such as *lectio difficilior potior*. It is possible that the ever-shifting nature of *divinatio* to some extent accounts for its marginalisation in handbooks and overviews. Since *divinatio* often plays a central role in editions, one might have expected it to be treated more fully there, and while this is sometimes the case, more often a variant or conjecture is simply adopted with little or no discussion. In effect, this forces the reader to reconstruct the editor’s *divinatio* by means of *divinatio*. It is easy to see how this situation may contribute to a general perception that *divinatio* is somehow less scientific than stemmatology, not least since the latter deals in large numbers and statistics, which tend to instil a degree of awe in humanistic scholars. In spite of appearances, however, I will argue that *divinatio* is often the more powerful of the two.

In the following, I address three challenges to textual criticism, two of which have been successfully met by the mainstream discourse, the third not. The third challenge can also be met, but this would entail paying more principled attention to *divinatio*.

3.1 Challenge Met: Joseph Bédier

In 1928, Joseph Bédier famously claimed that the preponderance of two-branched stemmas in editions is due to the fact that editors wish to be able to choose freely among the variants in order to shape the text according to their wishes (Bédier 1928). Paul Maas and Sebastiano

Timpanaro have pointed out, however, that while the observation that two-branches stemmas dominate is correct, the conclusion that this is due to scholarly preferences does not follow. If there are three witnesses to a text, logic dictates that roughly 60–70% of the stemmatic possibilities will be two-branched, and the preponderance of two-branched stemmas therefore has no bearing on the validity of the method (Maas 1960, 29–30; corrected values in Timpanaro 2005 [1963], 163). Odd Einar Haugen has shown that two-branched stemmas dominate also in the Arnamagnæan editions – the most “scientific” of Old Norse editions – even though their editors have no reason to favour them³. Other philologists have refuted numerous unfounded claims in Bédier’s argumentation, as well as demonstrated its incompatibility with empirical observation (Montanari 2003, 358–404; Trovato 2014, 77–108). In short, Bédier’s claim that editors actively favour two-branches stemmas has been soundly falsified. While his explanation has turned out to be groundless, however, a point that is less often made is that two-branched stemmas remain a considerable obstacle to the stemmatic method, no matter their causes. I return to this point later on.

3.2 *Challenge Met: New Philology*

In 1989–1990, a movement initially called “new philology” and later “material philology” emerged, arguing for the desirability of an increased emphasis on manuscripts, scribes and variants, rather than a focus on the author alone (seminal publications include Cerquiglini 1999 [1989] and Nichols 1990). Of course, paying attention to scribes and manuscripts need not be paired with critique of textual criticism, but in practice this has often been the case. The challenge of new philology is not so much of a factual nature as of a rhetorical one, since little of the critique has had a basis in scholarly realities (Myrvoll 2023; Males 2023). Nonetheless, the rhetoric of new philology has proven remarkably influential and therefore calls for some comment. As the mismatch between new-philological claims and reality has been dealt with elsewhere, I here focus instead on isolationism and rejection of method.

From the outset, new philology has been characterised by isolationism, ignoring precursors and scholarship that might expose weaknesses in the argumentation. Thus, for instance, an increased focus on manuscripts and scribes had been prominent in philological scholarship from around 1900 onwards at the latest, and there was thus little “new” about this in 1990

³ Haugen finds that ON editions have roughly the same percentage of bifurcation (83%) as Old French ones (82,5%), which is slightly higher than what one might expect on statistical grounds (roughly 60–70%) (HAUGEN 2015, 607). The reason is presumably what Haugen calls «the force of dichotomy», meaning the editors’ aim to find variants that distinguish one manuscript from another (HAUGEN 2015, 608). The dynamics of the procedure may thus lead to a slight exaggeration of two-branched nodes, but this is not a considerable obstacle to the method. Rather, it is a reminder that the stemma is a working tool which should not be taken as an exact description of reality.

(Males 2023, 185–186; Males 2024, 145–147). Other examples of isolationist tendencies will emerge in the quotations from the *Handbook* below.

What was arguably more innovative about the movement, however, was its rejection of conventional philological method. New-philological scholarship often argues that one should study scribal variants – that is, changes in transmission – and criticises traditional ways of doing so, without presenting alternative methods. This omission is probably due to the fact that it is all but impossible to present a viable substitute. The methods for identifying changes in textual transmission have been developed through trial and error from ancient Alexandria to today, and to a large extent, they rely on preconditions that remain constant over time. Scribes will always be prone to mistake one letter for one of a similar shape, or to replace a word the scribe does not understand with one that he thinks that the author intended, or to skip between repetitions of the same word, thus omitting the intervening text. In the study of scribal change, a method that takes such basic preconditions into account will always be superior to one that does not. The methods of textual criticism can be refined, but they cannot be replaced, unless one assumes that the most common types of changes in transmission observable from Antiquity to today are illusory. To the best of my knowledge, no one has been willing to endorse such a claim, and as a result, no new method for the study of scribal changes has been presented.

Here lies the fundamental dilemma of new philology. The movement is based on the premise that “traditional” philology studies authors at the expense of scribes, and on that assumption, it has distanced itself from the methods of textual criticism. In reality, however, these methods are aimed at identifying scribal changes, which are what new philology set out to study in the first place. New philology has thus deprived itself of the means by which to achieve its stated goals.

For a long time, new philology safeguarded its perspectives by ignoring counterarguments. With the publication of the *Handbook of Stemmatology* in 2020, however, a standard description of the methods of textual criticism is now available in English, both in book form and open access, and several of the contributors address problems inherent to the new-philological paradigm (Roelli 2020a). It is to be hoped that the centrality and accessibility of this book will serve to reconnect the new-philological discourse, or by now perhaps rather discourses descended from the new-philological one, to that of textual criticism. Since the mentions of new philology in the book are brief and dispersed, I have here gathered a few that address the problems of scholarly isolationism and rejection of method. The first three relate to isolationism:

Indeed, many of the desiderata of the New Philology (another more recent Anglo-French school dating back to 1990) had been answered by Italian scholars half a century before they were raised. (Roelli 2020b, 3)

Italian neo-Lachmannian philology, for example, was largely neglected by Anglo-American ‘New Philology’. (Duval 2020, 457)

For linguistic reasons, the intense methodological reflection of the [Italian] neo-Lachmannians did not find the audience it deserved: the ‘New Philology’ ignored their work, and the French tradition, largely atheoretical after Bédier, did not know it well. (Duval 2020, 463)

The following relates to method:

The central figure – ‘hero’ in Cerquiglini’s words – of Material Philology is the scribe, as opposed to the author; but ignoring the diachronic perspective and not studying the textual tradition, sometimes aggravated by the editor’s lack of the necessary linguistic and philological knowledge, opens the floodgates to complete relativism, favours misinterpretation, and thus is an obstacle to the appreciation of the specificity of the single witness. Indeed, we cannot understand a scribe’s work without considering the sources he used, that is, the work of the preceding scribes. And we cannot understand the work of those previous scribes without considering the author’s work. (Palumbo 2020, 99)

Paolo Trovato, one of the most important scholars for the exploration and dissemination of methodological advances in textual criticism, makes the same point more succinctly:

One of the aims of the so-called New Philology is the assessment of scribal behaviour, but the studies published so far do not provide relevant information. (Trovato 2020, 134)

As seen from the above, the challenge from new philology never had noteworthy substance, but it has nonetheless been influential, at times even dominant. As such, it deserves some attention, so that it is not allowed to undermine the credibility of the philological enterprise. At one point in the *Handbook*, one may read that the method of common errors, that is, stemmatology «has more and more become recognised as a method “there is no need to defend” and whose “main elements [...] are simply self-evident”» (Trovato 2020, 135). I believe that this statement is in one sense true, but that it is nonetheless too optimistic. Philology relies on the knowledge of language, especially older languages, and such training has been receding from schools and universities for half a century or so. It is probably no coincidence that one of the countries that has best withstood this development, namely Italy, has also been leading in the exploration of text-critical method. Because of this, but also due to the disciplinary fragmentation of philology into literature on one side and linguistics on the other, the number of scholars capable of applying the holistic perspectives needed for textual criticism has been steadily decreasing. By the same token, scholars to whom the “main elements” of the method are “self-evident” are fewer today than they were some decades ago, and the new-philological discourse suggests that the preconditions were far from optimal already around 1990.

Of course, it stands to reason that our main concern must be the validity of the method. Still, the marginalisation of philological training in education means that dissemination of text-critical method in an accessible format is also of crucial importance. Barring a change in educational priorities that seems to be nowhere in sight, this is the only means by which the merits of textual criticism can become self-evident to a greater number of scholars. The *Handbook* is a landmark in such accessible dissemination. Earlier standard works presuppose knowledge of the classical languages, whereas the *Handbook* can be used by any student or scholar. As such, it is apt to counteract isolationism and misrepresentations, but also, on a more positive note, to invite a greater number of scholars to develop an awareness of the possibilities of stemmatology. I would argue, however, that the epistemological underpinnings of other aspects of textual criticism are still in need of increased dissemination and elucidation.

3.3 Challenge not Met: Reality

Thus far, textual criticism appears safe and sound, its main critics having been rebutted either factually or rationally or both. With regard to Bédier, textual critics have restored their honour, since there are no signs that they behave in the unprofessional manner ascribed to them. Most appear to be satisfied with having proven their innocence and pay limited attention to the fact that even if Bédier's explanation was false, his observations regarding the predominance of two-branched stemmas remains a profound obstacle to the dynamics of stemmatology. If some 60–80% of stemmas in most traditions are two-branched, editors will mostly have to choose from stemmatically equal variants, which in effect is a kind of *divinatio*. (Maas calls this variety *selectio*, but he clarifies that its preconditions are fundamentally the same as *divinatio*.) Of course, the editor may come across instances where the majority principle applies even though the stemma is two-branched, as when the same variant is found in two branches. Thus, for instance, one may encounter situations like this:

Branch 1		Branch 2	
MS ₁	MS ₂	MS ₃	MS ₄
variant a	variant b	variant b	variant c

Here, “variant b” presumably goes back to the archetype, whereas “a” and “c” are innovations. It is thus not the case that two-branched stemmas exclude stemmatological examination, but they pose a considerable challenge to it, since it is in the nature of two-branched stemmas to have many, and often most, of their variants divided between the branches:

Branch 1		Branch 2	
MS ₁	MS ₂	MS ₃	MS ₄
variant a	variant a	variant b	variant b

In the minority of cases where we have a stemma with three or more branches, the preconditions are optimal. Since two scribes would presumably not make the same innovation independently, the majority principle applies and the variant that stands alone against two branches is deemed secondary. In some instances, however, we cannot exclude independent yet identical innovation, such as changing an “and” to an “or” and the like. Such instances are referred to as “trivial” innovations and are deemed irrelevant. Having eliminated these, we are left with a set of significant innovations which may either be eliminated in order to approach the text of the author or studied to understand the activity of the scribes.

This is neat in theory, but in practice, problems frequently ensue. It is often difficult to say which changes could or could not have been made independently by two scribes. It is therefore necessary to study a whole set of changes in order to exclude such an explanation. If we do, we may sometimes attain virtual certainty that a larger set of variants is mainly due to innovation in one branch. The problem is, however, that we tend not to achieve the same degree of plausibility for individual variants. Can we really exclude the possibility, for instance, that in one or two cases, two scribes have independently trivialised in the same way? And can we confidently rule out contamination, which might result in a monogenetic innovation being present in two branches? Much of the time, possibilities like these mean that the plausibility of individual variants can only be provisionally evaluated through the stemmatic method. This does not mean that the method is flawed, only that it has limitations.

These restrictions have considerable consequences for scholars who wish to use an edited text in order to explore a specific topic. In that situation, one often needs to know if the text of a particular passage is reliable. If we can only attain, say, a 2/3 plausibility that an important variant in our passage is reliable, it matters little that we can be virtually certain that the larger set of variants to which it belongs derives primarily from the archetype. Of course, we can often reach a higher degree of certainty when dealing with “true” errors, that is, violations of grammar, syntax, metre, etc. Such errors are generally unintentional, and as such, they are much more likely to have originated with a scribe than with the author. These are identified by *divinatio*, however, and stemmatic observations can only serve to corroborate that they are scribal in origin. By contrast, for instance, if a poetic text simultaneously violates both metre and grammar, we can be virtually certain that it has seen scribal corruption, even in the absence of variants. In many instances, a highly plausible variant or even conjecture can be supplied. In practice, then, scholars must often rely on *divinatio* rather than stemmatology in order to evaluate whether a reading is reliable enough to form the basis for further conclusions.

4. ERRORS AND USEFULNESS

In stemmatology, “error” is typically used to denote an innovation. If identified, it can be reversed, since the means by which errors are identified is the same as that by which readings from the archetype are. Thus, for instance, if three witnesses from three different branches of a stemma provide us with the variants “a”, “b” and “b”, “a” may be identified as an error and “b” as the reading of the archetype. In *divinatio*, “error” means a violation of some rule or logical consistency, such as grammar, syntax, sense, metre, etc., and there is no intrinsic dynamic connecting the identification of errors to their reversal. Sometimes a plausible variant or conjecture presents itself, at other times not. In the following, I use “error” only in this latter meaning, that is, in the same way a schoolteacher would.

Errors of this kind are generally attributable to scribes, who focused on copying rather than on sense, metre, etc. They are the optimal kind of variants for constructing a stemma, since while two scribes might intentionally make the same change to a text in order to somehow “improve” it, it is considerably less likely that they would unintentionally make the same error. If such “true errors” are shared between a number of witnesses, they thus strongly indicate that these belong to the same branch of transmission.

While errors are thus an asset for reconstruction, my main reason for drawing attention to them relates to their independent value. I would argue that editors often do not draw sufficient attention to errors unless they feel in a position to provide a solution to the perceived problem. Of course, the *crux desperationis* (“†...†”) is a conventional sign for marking a passage that defies interpretation, indicating that some irreversible error must have occurred in transmission. In general, however, this is used only to indicate that it seems impossible to extract any reasonable meaning from the text. It is typically not used when the text makes sense but there are still reasons to assume that it does not derive from the author in its transmitted form. There is no conventional sign for such instances, or rather, there no longer is, since the Alexandrian *obelos* served this function (Reynolds and Wilson 1991, 10)⁴.

In short, if an error can be reversed by supplying a variant reading or plausible conjecture, it is acknowledged, but if not, the problem is minimised or bypassed in silence, unless the passage makes no sense. Of course, this is a tendency, not a rule, and the now standard “Klaeber 4” edition of *Beowulf* is an admirable counterexample, often commenting on implausible readings even when there is no clear solution in sight (Fulk, Bjork and Niles 2008). This is useful to scholars drawing on editions in their research, since for many purposes, it will then be crucial to know whether the text may be considered a reliable representation of the

⁴ Textual critics sometimes refer to “diagnostic conjectures” serving a related function, that is, «a conjecture which, while no one can feel confident that it is right, serves the purpose of indicating the kind of sense that is really required or the kind of corruption that may have occurred» (WEST 1973, 58).

author's intentions or not. Pointing out likely errors is therefore an activity of considerable independent value. Perhaps one might even contemplate reintroducing a sign to mark instances where the wording is unlikely to derive from the author, even though the text makes sense from a semantic point of view. This would serve as an accessible indicator to readers that they should be wary of drawing conclusions about the author based on such passages.

To a large extent, text-critical editing consists in solving problems, and from that perspective, it is perhaps not surprising that many editors are loath to point out problems without solving them. It is like an itch that will not go away. If viewed from a different angle, however, the identification of implausible readings can be seen as problem-solving in its own right, since once a text has been scrutinised from this perspective, the portions of it that contain no such problems can more confidently be studied as authorial products. I now turn to three case studies to illustrate the parameters under discussion.

4.1 Case I: *The Ubiquity of Trivialisation*

Before moving to examples from Old Norse poetry, I think that it may be useful to provide an example suggesting that philologists of all brands rely more on *divinatio* than perhaps we think. This state of affairs is to some degree “hidden” by the fact that most scholars read manuscripts and editions in different ways: manuscripts with an eye to palaeography, orthography, layout, etc., editions for consecutive reading. Only when some special need arises do we compare a manuscript to an edition, nor do most consult the *apparatus criticus* in a consistent manner while engaging in consecutive reading. Especially in languages not their own, scribes will often trivialise in a manner that makes the text ungrammatical or illogical, but which is so easy to reverse that editors do so without qualms. As a result, the texts that most philologists use for consecutive reading have been cleansed of many obvious errors by means of *divinatio*, and since consulting the manuscript or even the *apparatus* impedes the reading experience, such cleansing easily escapes notice. More or less any example might be chosen to illustrate this point, and I therefore simply quote the most recent one that I happened to come across, adopting the emendations proposed by Matthias Thiel (1973, 120). In the manuscript Paris, BnF, MS lat. 13025, fol. 26^{rb}15–26^{va}9, from the first quarter of the ninth century, we read:

Hebraicarum litterarum formae duae sunt: una antiqua qua Samaritani utuntur. Altera posterior quae Iudaei. Eadem causa: captiui facti filii Israel et Babyloniam ducti iussit rex Assyriorum ne deserta remaneret terra supradictorum.

In order for the text to make sense, the following changes are necessary:

Hebraicarum litterarum formae duae sunt: una antiqua qua Samaritani utuntur. Altera posterior **qua** Iudaei. **Ea de** causa: captiuis factis filiis Israel et Babyloniam ductis iussit rex Assyriorum ne deserta remaneret terra supradictorum.

This allows for the translation:

There are two forms of the Hebrew letters: one ancient, which the Samaritans use, and another later form, which the Jews use. For this reason: When the sons of Israel were taken captive and led to Babylon, the king of the Assyrians ordered that the land of the aforementioned people should not remain deserted. (Engesland, forthcoming)

By way of comment, *uti* governs the ablative, and *quae* is thus an obvious trivialisation, due to the fact that the verb is not repeated. *Eadem* ('for the same [reason]') is extremely frequent, whereas *ea de* is not, but the reason is introduced only at this point, meaning that there can be no "same" reason. The scribe has thus simply written the most frequent form, irrespective of context. The nominative *captivi* etc. is the simplest possible form but cannot be accommodated by the syntactical context. The required ablative absolute *captivis* etc. requires a higher level of awareness of language and context.

In this short quotation, we thus have three instances of trivialisation, one of which affects four words, rendering the text both ungrammatical and illogical. There is nothing unusual about this situation, but editors tend to spare readers from being constantly exposed to such obvious blunders, since for the vast majority of purposes, they are only a distraction. There is nothing challenging about the restoration, and so examples like these are usually left out of the discussion on textual criticism. Even though they have little to offer in the way of analytical interest, however, I would suggest that it is useful to keep this enormous category of easily reversible errors in mind for two reasons. One is that examples like this show us how much we really rely on *divinatio*, in spite of its marginalisation in the text-critical discourse. Another is that an awareness of such instances may serve to balance the debate on editorial interventions. Leaving theoretical perspectives aside, is it really likely that a substantial portion of the scholarly community would wish to consult editions riddled with logical and grammatical errors, most of which are clearly unintentional and easily reversed? Or, put another way: do we really want every reader of an edition to have individually to perform the task of an editor before being able to study a medieval text as a text? If, as I suspect, the answer to these questions is "no", then philologists overall have more in common than one might be led to think based on the debate.

4.2 Case II: *fé* versus *fekk*

In early Germanic literature as elsewhere, the possibility of identifying errors is greatest in texts regulated by metre and conventionalised language. I now turn to the first of two examples illustrating this point. The reality of textual criticism is so varied that I believe that the best I can do is to discuss cases that I find to be representative of practices within my own field, rather than "spreading it thin". I do so by means of one example from each of the current

standard editions-with-commentary of eddic and skaldic poetry. Both cases have been treated elsewhere, but I nonetheless believe them to be particularly well suited to elucidate the parameters under discussion (Þorgeirsson 2020, 52–53; Males, forthcoming).

The first example is intended to illustrate all four main parameters mentioned at the outset (the importance of *divinatio*; the independent value of identifying errors; the marginalisation of metre; the need for itemised metrical analysis).

In the cosmological Old Norse poem *Völuspá* (second half of the tenth century), stanza 29.1–4 reads (alliteration in bold):

Valði henni **H**erfǫðr
hringa ok men,
 fé, **spj**oll **sp**aklig
 ok **sp**áganda.

‘The lord of the army chose rings and jewellery for her [the *völva*], money, wise reports and prophecy-wands/prophetic magic.’

This stanza is contained in one manuscript only, and it has most likely seen at least two centuries of oral transmission before being recorded on parchment. In the poem, the ‘lord of the army’, that is, Óðinn, receives information about past and future events from the *völva* ‘seeress’. From this perspective, it seems strange that Óðinn should give the *völva* not only riches, but also ‘wise reports and prophecy-wands/prophetic magic’. ‘Wise reports’ are what he receives, not what he gives, and while the meaning of *spáganda* ‘prophecy-wands/prophetic magic’ is somewhat elusive, plausible interpretations of it seem more appropriate to the seeress than to Óðinn, at least in this poem.

For these reasons, Ludwig Ettmüller proposed the following emendation (Ettmüller 1861, 3):

Valði henni **H**erfǫðr
hringa ok men,
 fekk **spj**oll **sp**aklig
 ok **sp**áganda.

‘The lord of the army chose rings and jewellery for her [the *völva*], [he] got wise reports and prophecy-wands/prophetic magic.’

When Ettmüller presented his emendation, the metre of the poem was not well understood. Through the subsequent work of Eduard Sievers, it became clear that the first noun of a verse must carry alliteration, meaning that the verse fé, **spj**oll **sp**aklig is unmetrical, whereas fekk **spj**oll **sp**aklig is not. Sense and metre thus combine to indicate that the verse fé, **spj**oll **sp**aklig is corrupt. Whether Ettmüller’s emendation is correct is another matter.

We turn now to the treatment of this stanza in the current standard edition-with-commentary, the *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, produced by a team of Frankfurt scholars in the period 1997–2019. The editors do not address the problem that the stanza seems to be at odds with the poem at large, but simply note: «Die überlieferte Wortlaut ist grammatisch und syntaktisch unproblematisch. Aus methodischen Gründen ist daher eine Emendierung abzulehnen. Einziger Einwand wäre, daß *fé* als erstes Nomen einer Langzeile nicht in den Stab eingebunden ist» (von See et al. 1997–2019, I: 266). The metrical problem is here presented as a minor flaw. Interestingly, however, the same situation is treated differently in the first stanza of the poem. In this instance, we have two manuscripts. In **R** (c. 1270), the first couplet reads *Hljóðs bið ek | allar kindir* ‘I ask all races for silence’, whereas **H** (early fourteenth century) has *Hljóðs bið ek allar | helgar kindir* ‘I ask all holy races for silence’. Being the first noun in the verse, *hljóðs* should carry alliteration, and we may thus decide in favour of the reading of **H**. Here, the wording of the editors is more decisive. Alliteration on the first noun is now a ‘rule’ (*Regel*), and they note that nearly all editors adopt the second version (von See et al. 1997–2019, I: 74). In the event, the *Kommentar* edits the two versions separately, and there is therefore no need to emend. Still, the editors are more prone to see a metrical problem here, and they seem to have no objections against scholars who introduce the reading from **H**.

The reason for the different treatment of the two stanzas is fairly obvious: due to the presence of another manuscript in the second instance, we are in a better position to select the “right” reading. When this is the case, the metrical violation is presented as such, whereas when we have only one witness, the same feature is treated as an imperfection giving little cause for concern. The identification of errors is thus conflated with the availability of solutions, and this is not unique to the editors of the *Kommentar*. I suspect that it is more common than not, although in most critical editions, the commentary is too sparse to reveal the underlying reasoning.

In the end, then, the editors’ discussion of *fé, spjöll spaklig* revolves around their views on emendation, even if it is presented as if they were evaluating the likelihood of error. I would suggest, however, that the opposite emphasis would have been more useful. After all, relatively few emendations are strong enough to allow the conscientious scholar to build an argument on the assumption that the restored text reflects that of the author. This being the case, the best service an editor can do to the reader is often to point out where the text most likely does *not* reflect the author’s intentions, allowing scholars to steer clear of such passages.

Another noteworthy feature in the comment on *fé, spjöll spaklig* quoted above is that the editors present only errors of grammar and syntax as justifiable cause for emendation. In other cases, however, they also allow for emendation based on sense. Thus, for instance, they emend *jorð vissi* ‘the earth knew’ to *jór þat vissi* ‘the horse knew it’ based on sense alone in *Guðrúnarkviða II* 5 (von See et al. 1997–2019, VI: 641). This reflects their practice overall: among grammar, syntax, sense and metre, they generally treat only the last as insufficient cause

for emendation. This bears comparison to the following item.

4.3 Case III: *gunnþinga járnhringar versus gunnþings éarnhringar*

This case is intended to illustrate that metre can be a powerful tool for selection even on its own. In Óttarr svarti, *Höfuðlausn* 8.8 (1020s), fifteen scribes writing down *Óláfs saga helga* ('the saga of Saint Óláfr', composed c. 1220–1240) have one variant, whereas the sole scribe copying the First Grammatical Treatise (composed c. 1150) has another. We seem to be dealing with two separate recordings of a stanza from oral tradition, meaning that stemmatological principles do not apply to the selection of variants. Nonetheless, an editor might easily be impressed by the fact that fifteen scribes, some of them quite faithful and relatively competent in poetry, share the same reading against a single scribe. Indeed, the variant of the fifteen was selected for the new standard edition of skaldic poetry. As we shall see, however, only the isolated variant is compatible with the metrical conventions prevalent in the poet's day.

According to the fifteen scribes and the new standard edition, Óttarr svarti, *Höfuðlausn* 8.5–8 reads:

Höfðu hart of krafðir
— hildir óx við þat — skildir
gang, en gamlir sprungu
gunnþinga járnhringar.

Shields, hard pressed, had movement, and old iron-rings of battle-meetings [MAIL-SHIRTS] sprang apart; battle increased at that. (Clunies Ross et al. 2007–, 1: 750)

According to one scribe and the previous editor, however, the last verse reads:

gunnþings éarnhringar (Jónsson 1912–1915, B 1: 269)

iron-rings of the battle-meeting [MAIL-SHIRTS]

The meaning is much the same, but the latter version has the hiatus form *éarn-*, which being disyllabic requires the singular genitive *-s* rather than the plural genitive *-a* in the preceding word. The version on top is the peculiar metrical type Eε, dividing the verse into two equal halves, whereas the one below is type A2k. In order to evaluate the merits of the two versions, it is necessary to take Craigie's law into account. In 1900, William Craigie noted that the fourth position (here: fourth syllable) cannot contain a heavy nominal (e.g. *fjólð* 'multitude', as opposed to the older form *fjól*, which is light) after a dip. In type Eε, the law applies to compounds. In such verses, Craigie's law states that long syllables are allowed in the fourth position in proper names, but not in appellatives, that is, in compounds where both elements retain their meaning (Patria 2023). Unlike, for instance, Old English, only trimoraic syllables

count as long in *dróttkvætt*, meaning that such a syllable must contain either a long vowel plus a consonant or a short vowel plus a consonant cluster. With proper names, we thus get verses like *bifkleif at Þórleifi* ('cliff of the shield-boss [SHIELD], from Þórleifr') (Clunies Ross et al. 2007–, 3: 451), whereas in appellatives, the fourth position must consist in a short syllable, as in *lōgsóta verfótum* ('ocean-steed [SHIP], sea-feet [OARS]') (Clunies Ross et al. 2007–, 1: 233). The first attested and securely datable violation is from c. 1066, in Þjóðolfr Arnórsson's *Sexstefja* 14.6 *ráðandi manndáða* ('performer of manly deeds [RULER]') (Clunies Ross et al. 2007–, 2: 126–27). Other occurrences belong to the twelfth century or later.⁵

Óttarr svarti's *Hofuðlausn* was composed in the 1020s, and it is therefore clear that he must have used the older form *éarn-*, not the younger *járn-*, which violates Craigie's law. Nonetheless, as noted above, the current edition favours the reading *járn-*. The editor is Matthew Townend, who comments as follows:

The line (*gunnþinga járnbringar* in ms. order) raises a question of syllable count. W, the sole ms. of [The First Grammatical Treatise], has sg. *gunnþings* here, and writes a clearly disyllabic 'éarn' for the first element of *járnbringar*, which might suggest a disyllabic form [...]. The First Grammarian comments that *kveðandin skyldi hann til at slíta eina samstofu í sundr ok göra tvær ór, til þess at kveðandi haldisk í hætti* 'the meter forced him [the poet] to split one syllable into two, so that the meter might remain intact' [...]. However, the gen. pl. reading *-þinga* in the *konungasögur* mss supplies the necessary six syllables for the line and so is followed here [...]. (Clunies Ross et al. 2007–, 1: 751–52)

The full logic of Townend's reasoning is not immediately obvious, but since he writes «might suggest a disyllabic form» versus «supplies the necessary six syllables», it would appear that he finds the syllabic count of *gunnþings éarnbringar* uncertain and therefore instead opts for the "safe" six syllables of other manuscripts. It is not clear whether he may also have been influenced by the ratio of fifteen manuscripts against one.

In the present context, the crucial point is that Craigie's law is not mentioned. Had it been taken into account, the development would have become clear. In the poet's own day, *gunnþinga járnbringar* would not have been acceptable. By the time the archetype of the fifteen manuscripts was written, linguistic change had caused disyllabic *éarn-* to become monosyllabic *járn-*, meaning that the verse became one position short. During the same period, Craigie's law had been abandoned. Replacing the *-s* with *-a* in *gunnþings* would thus both restore the syllable count and comply with current metrical practice in other regards. The reason that the older variant of the verse is retained only in the First Grammatical Treatise is

⁵ Þormóðr, *lausavísa* 4.8 *orms torg, í skjaldborgu* is found as a situational stanza in *Fóstbræðra saga*, which in tandem with its violation of Craigie's law suggests that it is spurious.

that this text was composed so early that disyllabic forms were still known. Like in the *Kommentar*, metre here remains an underexploited resource.

5. THE MARGINALISATION OF METRE

These examples are symptomatic of a tendency towards marginalisation of metre among editors of Old Norse poetry. As noted by R. D. Fulk, this is common in the editing of Old English poetry as well (Fulk 1997, 40; cf. also West 1973, 48). In Fulk's view, this is mainly attributable to the fact that few scholars have a detailed grasp on Germanic metre. While this is a likely primary cause, I would suggest that the matter is somewhat more complex.

In scholarship on early Germanic metre, references to general rules are prominent, as if we were dealing with, for instance, Greek hexameter. In reality, however, Germanic alliterative metre displays much greater variation from poet to poet than does hexameter, and this is especially true of Old Norse eddic metres. For this reason, it is often insufficient to state that some structure is unmetrical in a general sense. In addition, it is necessary to explore whether the poem in question adheres to the general rule. Thus, for instance, in evaluating the reading *fé, spjöll spaklig*, one might investigate whether the *Völuspá* poet follows the rule of having the first noun carry alliteration. In a useful study of emendations, Haukur Þorgeirsson has done precisely this. He notes that in the three instances apart from *fé, spjöll spaklig* where the first noun lacks alliteration in **R**, it carries alliteration in **H**, and in each instance, the reading in **H** is much more plausible for reasons of sense, syntax or metre (Þorgeirsson 2020, 52–53). In the only instance where we have no other manuscript with which to compare – *fé, spjöll spaklig* – the violation is associated with a problem of sense. This distribution cannot plausibly be ascribed to coincidence, but rather, it shows that while the poet followed the rule, the **R** scribe did not. This takes us back to the usefulness of *divinatio*. Exploring the metrical practice of the poet and combining the parameters of sense and metre allows us to be virtually certain that the verse *fé, spjöll spaklig* is corrupt. Arriving at such a high degree of likelihood by means of stemmatology alone would, as far as I can tell, be impossible. Furthermore, of course, stemmatology would be of no use in a case like this, where we have only one manuscript. Whether we accept the emendation *fekkk* is another matter. What we can say with a high degree of confidence will always be more useful than that which we cannot, and the great “win” in this instance is thus the identification of the error. It should be noted, however, that also in the case where we can be fairly confident about the right answer, namely *Hljóðs bið ek allar*, this has nothing to do with stemmatology. In that instance, we are simply so lucky as to have another manuscript, but the relative merits of the two readings can only be evaluated by recourse to *divinatio*, not stemmatology.

Haukur Þorgeirsson has led the way in introducing such poem-specific metrical analysis into the study of eddic poetry, but also in explaining the parameters involved in a manner accessible to non-metricists (Þorgeirsson 2016; 2020; 2023). The first adjustment is necessary for making metre into a more reliable tool for textual criticism, the second for allowing non-metricists to partake in the evaluation.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The preceding survey allows for several conclusions. First, we may note that critiques against textual criticism in general and stemmatology in particular do not stand up to scrutiny. Like all other scholarship, both may be done poorly, and censure of such practices is certainly justified. This has no bearing on textual criticism in contradistinction to other scholarly enterprises, however. A number of such critiques are discussed elsewhere (e.g. Fulk 1996; Þorgeirsson 2020; Myrvoll 2023; Males 2023).

More justified criticism of stemmatology could have been raised in relation to its limitations. While the validity of stemmatology is, as the *Handbook* says, “self-evident” in light of the method’s logical underpinnings, its applicability relies on favourable transmission, and even then, the degree of probability in individual instances is fair rather than great. This being the case, it is unfortunate that the main discourse of textual criticism has increasingly come to focus on stemmatology alone at the expense of *divinatio*. I would suggest that this tendency may at least partly be ascribed to the perceived “scientific” nature of stemmatology, which works with large numbers and statistics. Stemmatology’s susceptibility to digital analysis has increased the bias further. At the end of the day, however, it matters little if a method “looks” scientific, only if it can help us provide plausible answers to our questions. Taking this perspective would inevitably promote *divinatio* to a place of greater distinction in the text-critical discourse.

One important task that can only be performed through *divinatio* is the identification of true errors, about which we can be fairly certain that they have been engendered in transmission. Knowing if a passage is corrupt is highly useful information, irrespective of whether a solution can be supplied or not, and *divinatio* thus has a crucial function to fulfil that stemmatology cannot. In practice, editors are often loath to point out errors which they feel unable to reverse, but I would insist that this is a disservice to the reader. Users of editions need, in the first place, to grasp the parameters about which we may be fairly certain, including problems. Whether the editor is able to provide a solution to these is irrelevant to the evaluation of the problems themselves. On this point, I believe that the editorial mentality would benefit

from promoting problem-finding to a status comparable to but independent of problem-solving.

Two points relate to early Germanic metrics in particular. One is that editors tend to be unduly sceptical of metrical arguments, often due to a limited understanding of metre. Another is of a methodological nature. West Germanic alliterative metre and related Old Norse metres were realised in slightly different ways by different poets. Some restrictions are absolute, and in those instances, it is enough to refer to “the rule”. Often, however, one poet would make use of metrical possibilities that another would not. In such instances, it is necessary to take the metrical characteristics of the poem under study into consideration, rather than the general “rule”. This has rarely been done. Above, I discussed one example where the editors of the *Kommentar* could have explored whether the *Völuspá* poet ever violates the rule that the first noun in a verse must alliterate. Abstaining from such evaluation, the editors once treat the rule as a rule, whereas they elsewhere see it as an imperfection that is not weighty enough to take into real consideration. This flexible approach to metre is common among editors, as is a general disregard for metrical criteria, as we saw in the discussion of Craigie’s law. To the best of my knowledge, Haukur Þorgeirsson is the scholar who, in the study of Old Norse poetry, has done most to promote poem-specific metrical analysis for the purposes of textual criticism (Þorgeirsson 2016, 2020 and 2023). In Old English, “Klaeber 4” is a landmark for the same reason. Following in the footsteps of such initiatives, there is considerable room for advancement within the editing of early Germanic poetry, and not least in Old Norse.

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