

# Kings, Wars, and Duck Eggs: Interpretations of Poetry in Egil's Saga

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J. Connor Daughton

Kings, Wars, and Duck Eggs: Interpretations of Poetry in *Egil's Saga*

Although *Egil's Saga* is memorable enough for its bloodshed, feuds, and comically disgusting mead-hall scenes, the one characteristic which most distinctly sets it apart from the other Icelandic sagas is its extensive use of poetry. More than 60 sets of verse pepper the prose of this work—some heroic assertions, others touching epitaphs, and one so expertly crafted that it saves its speaker from death. The reason for these poems appearing within the text is fairly obvious: Egil Skallagrimsson, the tenth-century warrior and hero of the saga, was also a poet, and most of the poems within the saga are his. Their function within the saga, however, is less clear. Formally, they breathe life into the saga in a way that their prose equivalents could not, allowing the reader to connect more fully with Egil and his legacy simply by saying them aloud; yet all the while, a much deeper meaning dwells within the breathed life itself. Through analyzing that meaning, we find that these poems reflect the larger-than-life aura of Egil, as both man and saga hero, but also that they transcend this single work and shed light upon the values and experiences important to the Icelandic people, as well as motifs ingrained in their cultural subconscious since before Iceland was even discovered.

Upon first examining many of the poems, such heavy attributions may seem excessive. The sixteenth poem in the saga, for example, is little more than a recap of what has occurred thus far in the recent warfare between English forces, under the earls Alfgeir and Godric of Northumbria, and the invading Scottish army under King Olaf:

Olaf turned one earl in flight  
in a sharp encounter,  
and felled another; I have heard  
this warrior is hard to face.  
Godric went far astray  
on his path through the battlefield [died];

the scourge of England subdues  
half of Alfgeir's realm. (*Egil's Saga* 82)

Certainly, this poem is noteworthy in that it commemorates the conflict preceding the death of Egil's brother, Thorolf, as they fight for the English, but we modern readers are accustomed to finding more profound meanings within poetry than a simple memorial. For the Icelanders, though, that would have been reason enough. In Scandinavian (and, by extension, Icelandic) culture—especially before the area's conversion to Christianity—poetry was a means toward immortality. Egil's world is a pagan world, and neither of the two realms of afterlife was any Paradise. Hel guaranteed a bleak and dull existence, while Valhalla, though full of mead and fellowship, was but a rallying point before the ultimate defeat at Ragnarok. Poetry, in contrast, guaranteed that one's name would live on for generations, not only among the common people, but also in the courts of kings, where most poets took residence. Thus, through Egil relating the news to his companions, King Olaf gains acclaim lasting far beyond his life by killing Godric, while Earl Alfgeir is shamed for generations to come; the latter of these effects demonstrates, furthermore, that the blade of poetry can cut both ways.

Egil is quite aware of this tradition of eternalizing men and deeds, and especially of the praise poets gain in sharing their art. Indeed, he has been taking part in it for nearly his entire life. His first poem, composed at the age of about three, is addressed to his grandfather, Yngvar, but his language puts the old man in the position of a lord, a “shedder of gold rings.” In return, Egil receives three shells and a duck's egg—trifles representing the poet's usual reward of riches (*Egil* 52). This comically analogous relationship between poet/child and lord/adult is also the first of many instances illustrating that Egil is a larger-than-life character, worthy of praise and controversy among Icelanders for ages to come: the fact that he can write poetry (as well as

create havoc when drunk and ride a horse for miles) at such an early age sets up well his later identity as a memorable poet and brawler (*Egil* 51).

When he first meets King Eirik Blood-axe of Norway—an encounter which commences their decades-long feud—, Egil is acting in both of these capacities, as is illustrated in his poems in Chapter 44. His knowledge of runes, immunity to poison, and decision to kill his host, Bard, after pouring “the rain of the high god”<sup>1</sup> on him all make Egil a very singular figure—indeed, the poems paint him almost as an Icelandic trickster in his embodiment of social taboos (*Egil* 68). After subsequently evading royal forces, he makes another poem which promotes his own feats, though he quickly qualifies that self-aggrandizement by stating mid-poem, “I do not boast<sup>2</sup> overly” (*Egil* 70). Even though he is stating his opposition to using words he cannot back up with action, though, he is obviously tapping into a tradition that figures deeply in warrior cultures: the heroic boast. Examples of the boast include the *bēot* of Anglo-Saxon England, the most famous of which is Beowulf’s boast that he will kill Grendel without weapons. Egil may not be making a true *bēot* (since he declares what he has already done, not what he will do), but his mention of, and participation in, that tradition reinforces the fact that the society of Iceland and Norway at this point was still one in which violence was common and heroes were thirsty for praise.

Rather than memorialize any one event, other poems serve to describe and poeticize an aspect of life common to the Icelandic communal experience. Probably the most universal of these universal poems comes at the end of Chapter 58, when Egil begins the voyage home after his first excursion abroad:

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<sup>1</sup> This kenning is typically a metaphor for poetry; it has been hypothesized by the translator, however, that Egil—exceedingly drunk at this point—is actually about to throw up on his host. This interpretation would make the “rain” his vomit (*Egil* 68).

<sup>2</sup> Taken directly from Old Icelandic sources, the line is “*né fágak dul drjúgan,*” or, to use a more literal translation, “nor do I embellish with substantial self-conceit” (Thorardson; Zoëga). The term “boasting,” or *hræsni*, never comes up per se, but he is still obviously speaking of his actions with much pride—Egil the poet praising Egil the warrior.

With its chisel of snow, the headwind,  
 scourge of the mast, mightily  
 hones its file by the prow  
 on the path where my sea-bull treads.  
 In gusts of wind, that chillful  
 destroyer of timber planes down  
 the planks before the head  
 of my sea-king's swan. (*Egil* 107)

This poem, full of kennings and metaphors, captures both the beauty of the ship and the power of the ocean—an image so familiar to Icelanders that the antecedent of the pronoun “my” could be anyone at any time. Egil is not only speaking for himself here, but is acting as a mouthpiece for the whole of his homeland and heritage; his poetic prowess serves to immortalize the experience he shares with his countrymen.

A second vignette common to Icelanders is, of course, that of battle and bloodshed. Before raiding Lund, for example, Egil rouses his men to action. “Let us make our drawn swords glitter,” he calls, “you who stain wolves’ teeth with blood/...let us perform great deeds” (*Egil* 75). Once again, the identity of the speaker here does not truly matter, nor does the location of the raid. Any man (or woman) could say these words, if only he or she had the gift of poetry, and even without that gift, people would hold similar sentiments—the excitement, the adrenaline rush, the lust for glory overcoming fear of death—in their hearts. Similarly, Egil’s duel scene with Ljot the Pale rings, even in translation, with the fury that a warrior would take into single combat. Egil appears to welcome the coming fight as he urges his companions, “let us go to the dueling-place,” and a second time when he taunts Ljot with the words, “Man, we must make shields/ skirmish on this island” (*Egil* 124, 125). The growing eagerness for battle culminates in the fortieth poem:

Let polished hilt-wands clash,  
 strike shields with brands,  
 test our swords’ shine on shields,

redden them with blood.  
 Hack Ljot's life away,  
 play the pale man foul,  
 silence the troublemaker  
 with iron, feed eagle flesh. (*Egil* 125)

This series of imperative statements reads almost as if Egil is a bystander frenzied with anticipation of the bloody spectacle, making the poem accessible even to those Icelanders who preferred to watch battles, not fight them.

At times Egil also writes of the more civil aspects of society, but since he never truly fits into that society, the poems often take on a much more critical tone. One especially memorable set of verses comes during Egil's one true interaction with the court system, when he goes to claim an inheritance for his wife, Asgerd. The suit does not succeed, mostly because of Egil's past trouble with the Norwegian royal family, and Egil vents his displeasure with the legal system in two separate poems. Frustrated with the verdict, he reflects upon how he has earned nothing but "threats and hectoring," words as opposed to actions (*Egil* 99). Moreover, the highly metaphorical language in his poems contrasts sharply with the technical legalese both preceding and following it, further reinforcing the fact that Egil is a stranger to this realm of claims, suits, and settlements. Both of these effects cause us—and the Icelandic audience, in all probability—to question the effectiveness and justice of the court system. Another poem he recites not long afterwards epitomizes his feud with another representation of government, King Eirik:

Let the gods banish the king,  
 pay him for stealing my wealth,  
 let him incur the wrath  
 of Odin and the gods.  
 Make the tyrant flee his lands,  
 Frey and Njord; may Thor  
 the land-god be angered at this foe,  
 the defiler of his holy place. (*Egil* 101)

Egil's major complaint is the loss of his inheritance, but this poem can be taken more generally to reflect the sentiments between Icelanders and the kings that the first ones forsook. Egil's grandfather, Kveldulf, lost a son because of Eirik's father and had to flee his land in Norway in the aftermath, and many of his countrymen were driven away because of similar problems with the overbearing monarch. Egil's complaints, both of the king and the courts, offer his commentary on both of them, and his poems may reflect the ambivalent attitudes held by Icelanders regarding the government they had and the one they left behind.

Much of Egil's most stirring poetry, though, is concerned with matters limited neither to Iceland nor to Norway, nor to the world of the sagas in general. Rather, these poems deal with human experiences of friendship, death, and old age. Although most readers of the sagas are familiar with "The Head-Ransom,"<sup>3</sup> Egil also composes two other long poems. The first of these commemorates the passing of his sons, but it also expands to include the deaths of many more of his loved ones. He declares that the stories of their deaths are "harsh to tell," and that he would gladly do battle to avenge them, even against the sea, which took his son, Bodvar. But his old age prevents him from seeking justice: he is weak, and, in his words, "it is clear/...how an old man/ lacks helpers" to make his dream of justice a reality (*Egil* 154). He is similarly grief-stricken over the death of his brother, Thorolf, while they are fighting together in England as younger men; interestingly, though, his problem then is not avenging his brother (which he does during the battle), but dealing with his pain in private. Egil is still a spry warrior at this point, and feels compelled to keep up a strong appearance (*Egil* 89).

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<sup>3</sup> Egil creates and memorizes this poem in one night and then delivers it to King Eirik, who had since decided to execute him. However, the poem is so well-crafted that Eirik decides to spare him instead. Besides bringing about this miraculous outcome, "The Head Ransom" actually praises Egil as it appears to praise the king—an irony which everyone but Eirik appears to perceive.

Luckily, the younger Egil's sorrow is soon assuaged by King Athelstan of England, who, much like Yngvar with his three shells and duck's egg, gave Egil a ring and two chests of silver. Once again, Egil is inserted into the ring-giver and servant relationship, which seems to offer a similar level of courtly respect, public honor, and (perhaps most importantly) psychological companionship to what he has lost with brother's death. Now comforted once again, he is happy to declare, "Now I have found one who smoothed/ the wrinkles on my forehead" (*Egil* 91). Once he leaves Athelstan's court, he searches for another ring-giver and eventually finds one in his friend and kinsman by marriage, Arnbjorn, who, fittingly, is also the subject of the third long poem. Throughout its lines Egil gives much praise to his longtime comrade, but the true worth of their relationship can be summed up in one stanza:

By my side, better  
 than every other  
 spreader of treasure,  
 stood my loyal friend  
 whom I truly trusted,  
 growing in stature  
 with his every deed. (*Egil* 161)

In such a harsh and violent world, such bonds are hard to come by, and Egil certainly recognized the worth of Arnbjorn's generosity and friendship.

It is more than understandable, then, that news of the death of Arnbjorn hits Egil particularly hard, and it causes him to reflect on mortality at the end of his life. "Their numbers are dwindling, the famous/ warriors," he reflects. "Where will I find generous men,/ who...showered snows of silver/ in return for my words of praise?" (*Egil* 166). Both poems bring to mind once again the importance to Egil, even now in his old age, of a ring-giver for his poetry. Just as much as lost friendship, the lack of worthy men to grant him wealth and counsel

unsettles him. Soon after this, he dies—his final poem leaves him “alone, / a senile old man,” weak and neglected where he was once feared and renowned (*Egil* 181).

These themes of grief and demise are ubiquitous across humanity, of course, but the end of Egil’s particular story has a special bond to a motif found elsewhere under the umbrella of Germanic culture, namely, the Anglo-Saxon poem known as “The Wanderer.” Like Egil, the speaker struggles to keep his grief locked away; and like that of Egil, the speaker’s ring-giver, with whom he once enjoyed treasure and fame, is dead, leaving him alone and questioning where his friends—and time itself—have gone:

[...] I know it truly,  
 that it is in men a noble custom,  
 that one should keep secure his spirit-chest [mind],  
 guard his treasure-chamber [thoughts], think as he wishes.  
 The weary spirit cannot withstand fate,  
 nor does a rough or sorrowful mind do any good.  
 Thus those eager for glory often keep secure  
 dreary thoughts in their breast;  
 .....  
 Since long years ago I hid my lord  
 in the darkness of the earth, and I, wretched, from there  
 traveled most sorrowfully over the frozen waves,  
 sought, sad at the lack of a hall, a giver of treasure,  
 .....  
 Alas for the bright cup! Alas for the mailed warrior!  
 Alas for the splendor of the prince! How that time has passed away,  
 dark under the cover of night, as if it had never been!  
 (Miller 11b-18b, 22a-25b, 94a-96b)

The fact that such similarities, in style as well as theme, exist could reflect the level to which the Anglo-Saxons and Icelanders interacted. Egil did, of course, spend a substantial amount of time in England and thus could have been influenced by the Old English poetic tradition. Yet the Anglo-Saxons and Icelanders were still relatively close in culture as two offshoots of Germanic peoples, so Egil’s discovery of this motif—if any discovery took place—could easily have been more an act of archetypal remembrance.

At the current state of archaeological findings, this speculation is as correct or incorrect as any, and since we are unable to see into Egil's head (even on those occasions in which it has been excavated), it may remain speculation forever. What is more clear after investigation—for these final poems and for all the others in *Egil's Saga*—is their effect on the reader. If we were to read this entire saga with the poems omitted, we would still very likely find it an enjoyable and memorable work. The major plot points would remain, and the structure of the story would not be compromised. But just as worthwhile would be a reading solely of the saga's poems, for, while completely disjointed from one another by the lack of a plot, it would give us the essence of the larger work in a way that the prose could not. We would come to know Egil as a poet and warrior, but also as a lonely human being on the outside of society, searching for fame, a ring-giver and, above all, a faithful friend. We would feel the spray of the sea and the gust of wind aboard ships and feel a hint of the rush before raiding Lund. We would admire Arnbjorn, mourn for Bodvar, and feel, through it all, a certain isolation that is somehow familiar to us and has resonated down the line of English literature for the past millennium and beyond. In short, we would not have the prose body that Egil once lived, but we would have the poetic soul he crafted—the only part of him which still remains alive.

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