

**Jakub Morawiec**

(Katowice, Uniwersytet Śląski)

## A FEW THOUGHTS ON WEEPING AND MANLY BEHAVIOUR IN OLD NORSE LITERATURE

At first sight, the two elements highlighted in the title, weeping and manly behaviour, seem to be absolutely separate. Crying lies completely outside the world of male virtues and is not part of a typical picture of a masculine hero. Medieval Scandinavian literature, first of all sagas and myths, provides us with approximately the same pattern. Weeping belongs to the world of women, whereas men were generally supposed to “behave like men”. Any sign of a “female factor” in a male profile would have been condemned, as any instance of this kind would have questioned and challenged another important social factor – honour. In other words, male weeping could not agree with male honour, so men were supposed to do their best to avoid reactions that would call their social status into question.

Still, Old Norse accounts provide us with occasional instances of male weeping that have recently attracted the attention of scholars. The aim of this paper is first to recapitulate these recent views and then to supplement them with my own thoughts on the subject. These recent contributions I intend to refer to are in two articles: the first by Erin Goeres<sup>1</sup>, and the second by Kristen Mills<sup>2</sup>.

The circumstances surrounding the funeral of the Norwegian king Magnús the Good, son of St. Óláfr, constitute the basis of Goeres’ analysis. The memorable event is described in several kings’ sagas most notably in the Flayetjarbók ver-

---

<sup>1</sup> E.M. Goeres, *How to do with tears. The Funeral of Magnús inn góði*, “Saga-Book” 37 (2013), pp. 5–26.

<sup>2</sup> K. Mills, *Grief, Gender, and Genre. Male Weeping in Snorri’s Account of Baldr’s Death, Kings’ Sagas, and Gesta Danorum*, “The Journal of English and German Philology” 113:4 (2014), pp. 472–496.

sion of Magnúss saga góða ok Haralds harðráða<sup>3</sup>. According to the latter account, some members of King Magnús' retinue, his foster father Einarr Þambaskelfir and Þórirr, started to grieve once they learnt about his illness<sup>4</sup>. When the king finally died, *nu er þar enn til ath taka ath j frafalle Magnus konungs uar mikid nidrfall huorutueggia rikin Danmork og Noregi og uar hann miog harmdaudi flestum monnum*<sup>5</sup>. Sadness and grief connected people during Magnús's funeral, which took place in Niðaross. All lamented over the dead monarch, both his retainers and ordinary people. As the author of the saga concludes: these events provoked the grief of many a man in all of Norway<sup>6</sup>.

The story of death and funeral of Baldr, son of Óðinn, as known from the mythological accounts in the Elder Edda and Gylfaginning, is another starting point of Goeres' analysis<sup>7</sup>. Both accounts recall the general grief of all beings who wished that the young god, killed accidentally, could live once again. For this reason, nobody hesitates to fulfil the wish of the goddess Hel, who agrees to release Baldr on the condition that the whole world weeps for him. This is disturbed by treacherous Loki, who, disguised as a giantess, refuses to join the rest of the world in weeping; the reaction that decides Baldr's fate<sup>8</sup>.

According to Goeres, both cases are good examples of collective mourning, the phenomenon that also allowed men to share their emotions and openly display their ultimate sadness by weeping. As Goeres states, in these specific cases, male weeping should not be considered as a sign of weakness. Rather, it should be seen as the somatic manifestation of a complex psychosocial process. It provides the means through which the bereaved communicate their emotional experience to the wider community and differentiate themselves from those unaffected by the death of the person mourned. It especially refers to Magnús' hirðmenn, who, by public weeping, express their unity as king's retainers and show the exclusive character of their group<sup>9</sup>.

This state of emotions seems to be confirmed by skaldic stanzas analysed by Goeres that refer to the day of Magnús' funeral. Both Oddr kíkínaskáld and Þjóðólfr Arnórsson voice the whole set of emotions, shared by all king's followers who constitute, as Goeres puts it<sup>10</sup>, the emotional community. In other words, the funeral of the deceased king is another, quite specific, occasion on which to

<sup>3</sup> *Flateyjarbók. En samling af norske konge-sagær*, Vol. III, Christania 1868, pp. 328–334.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 328–329.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 332.

<sup>6</sup> *Flateyjarbók*, p. 334.

<sup>7</sup> E.M. Goeres, *How to do with tears...*, pp. 5–6.

<sup>8</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda. Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. by A. Faulkes, London 2005, pp. 45–46.

<sup>9</sup> E.M. Goeres, *How to do with tears...*, pp. 6–8.

<sup>10</sup> Following Barbara Rosenwein's theory (*Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages*, Ithaca 2006).

display the exclusivity and unity of the *hirð* that shares the sadness, and also the tears, in the same way as it shared the king's favour, access to riches and political splendour.

According to Goeres, Magnús' funeral seems to have gained a reputation as an unusual event precisely because of the extent to which emotion was publicly displayed. It is important to note, following Goeres, the political context of the event. The tears of Magnús' *hirðmenn* seem to express not only the loss of the favoured king; they also seem to symbolize some kind of resistance to his successor, Haraldr harðráði<sup>11</sup>.

In this context, both of the stories of the death of Magnús and Baldr share the same perspective of a claim to general grief that marginalizes gender conventions and is dictated by extraordinary conditions: the succession to the Norwegian throne by Haraldr and the approaching end of the mythical world respectively.

An almost identical approach defines Kristen Mills' analysis. She embraces many more instances of male weeping in her article that appear in various Icelandic sagas and other sources (like Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*) of the medieval North<sup>12</sup>. At first, she considers them from the perspective of gender requirements. Weeping remains the domain of women, thus male weeping is a sign of weakness and as such questions social order. Mills points out that within the saga realm the accusation of crying (with respect to men) was considered a tremendous insult to masculine identity. Crying for reasons other than sadness or grief was considered unmanly<sup>13</sup>. However, the cases of royals, like Magnús, Amleth and Valdemar, and divine beings, like Baldr, gave room for an exceptional approach to male weeping. Grief and sadness over the death of a high-status individual could include male tears, employed to demonstrate the exceptional esteem in which the deceased was held<sup>14</sup>.

Both Goeres and Mills emphasize a perspective, that in my opinion, remains crucial to understand the conditional acceptance of male weeping as attached to grief for a deceased person. This is, apart from sadness and despair, the lack of stability and safety, accompanied by the fear of an uncertain future. It is somehow visible in the story of Baldr. Both gods and other beings seem to know that Baldr's death is the first sign of the end of the world. Thus, their tears may also reflect a fear of the new world order that remains uncertain and hardly positive in the light of a potential victory for the enemies of Asgard<sup>15</sup>.

This tendency seems to be even more visible in the story of death of Magnús the Good. All kings' sagas underline the barely hidden tension between Magnús and his uncle Harald. It was not easy for them to settle terms and share power in

---

<sup>11</sup> E.M. Goeres, *How to do with tears...*, p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> K. Mills, *Grief, Gender, and Genre...*, pp. 478–490.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 479.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 484–485.

<sup>15</sup> See L.P. Ślupecki, *Mitologia skandynawska w epoce wikingów*, Kraków 2013, pp. 202–203.

the country<sup>16</sup>. The co-regency of Norway did not satisfy either of them. Moreover, saga authors portray the former as the rex iustus, and the latter is the hard-ruler. As was noted above, the first news of the king's illness alarms his followers, and they are constantly afraid of the prospect of Haraldr ruling the country alone. Haraldr, on the other hand, seems to confirm these fears. He is not eager to favour Magnús' followers, does not trust them, and treats them like potential traitors.

Leaving aside, at least for a while, the historical veracity of the story, I can only agree with Goeres that the use of Oddr's stanzas in the account of Magnús' funeral results in the strengthening of the impression of the emotions that the king's retainers shared at that very moment. In order to supplement the arguments of both authors, Old Norse literature had no better way to express any feelings and emotions than skaldic poetry<sup>17</sup>.

Obviously, we are dealing with a special case here. Usually, skalds focused on various aspects of masculine prowess. If they dealt with the opposite, it was only to insult somebody with their *niðvísur*<sup>18</sup>. In this context, poetry that praises male grief and tears could be found as cheap provocation. Both authors, however, rightly indicate that a death of this very leader, a respected and popular ruler, created circumstances that fully justified such an attitude. On a symbolic level, their loss was very similar to the loss of Baldr for the mythological world. The death of a monarch and a patron also meant a lack of certainty about the future, political and material status. These men were ready to weep not only to manifest their sorrow but also ongoing unity – the only reasonable way to face a shaky future.

For this reason, it seems reasonable to treat male weeping over a deceased ruler as a physical supplement to the mourning poetry, *erfíkvæði*, that Oddr's and Þjóðólfr's stanzas represent. In this context, the arguments of both articles may be further developed and strengthened by examples only briefly treated by both Goeres and Mills.

Hallfreðr Óttarsson is one of the most renowned skalds, known mainly for his service and poetry for the Norwegian king Óláfr Tryggvason. He is also the protagonist of *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds*, a supposed story of his life. Hallfreðr, similarly to other young Icelandic poets, finds it hard to accept the norms of the local community, gets into conflicts with other prominent chieftains and tries to win his case through his poetry. This quite uniform profile features, among others, an unfortunate love-affair, that leads to tragic consequences. In the case of Hallfreðr, it is a duel with Gríss, the husband of his beloved Kolfinna. Both men hope that a victory over their opponent will eventually allow them to attain their

---

<sup>16</sup> J. Morawiec, *Miedzy poezją a polityką. Rozgrywki polityczne w Skandynawii XI wieku w świetle poezji ówczesnych skaldów*, Katowice 2016, pp. 527–532.

<sup>17</sup> E.M. Goeres, *How to do with tears...*, pp. 16–17.

<sup>18</sup> F. Ström, *Nid, ergi and Old Norse moral attitudes*, London 1973; A. Finlay, *Monstrous Allegations. An Exchange of ýki in Bjarnar saga hítðlakappa*, "Alvissmál" 10 (2001), pp. 21–44.

goals<sup>19</sup>. This is the reason, according to the saga, why all involved in the conflict are very surprised when Hallfreðr does not turn up for the fight. It turns out that on that very same morning, he had gone out to a hillock, and had seen some men riding towards him in coloured clothing. He asked them for news, and they told of the fall of King Óláfr. Hallfreðr, stared as though he had been hit by a stone, and at once walked back to his booth in great sorrow, and lay straight down on his bed<sup>20</sup>.

Seeing this, Grís's men said that his behaviour was unmanly. It was only Gríss who understood the poet's behaviour: "It is not that way at all. I had less honour for the emperor of Byzantium, yet it struck me as the greatest news when I lost my sovereign. Love for a liege lord burns hot"<sup>21</sup>.

Both men were reconciled and Hallfreðr left Iceland and sailed to Norway. There he managed to find retainers of King Óláfr who witnessed his death. Their accounts let the skald compose the *erfidrápa* about the king. Still, according to the saga, he was unhappy and could not find pleasure in anything. His despair moved him to formulate the idea of killing jarl Eiríkr of Hlaðir, but a miraculous intervention by King Olaf made him change his plans<sup>22</sup>.

Although it is not explicitly stated, one can assume that Hallfreðr and those of king Óláfr's retainers who survived the battle of Svoldr, constituted another emotional community. Similarly to Magnús' hirðmenn, they could grieve and fear the future, defined by the reign of jarl Eiríkr. The skald's *erfidrápa*, in the same way as the stanzas of Oddr and Þjóðólfr, was supposed to express these feelings in the best and most proper way possible. Interestingly enough, on the level of the Hallfreðar saga narrative, one can add Gríss to this community. He alone, the retainer of the emperor, could understand skald's feelings. His words point at some kind of mutual understanding that both shared. Once again, the bonds between the lord and his hirð were defined by an exclusiveness that distinguished those who not only were good enough to deserve royal favour but also could afford to express their loyalty in this specific way, otherwise found as unmanly.

Another example also refers to the renowned and distinguished skald Sigvatr Þórðarson, famous for his service to King Óláfr Haraldsson. Their relations were complex. Sigvatr, being a very active poet, had to face accusations of treachery against the king. Nevertheless, Óláfr managed to keep his favour towards Sigvatr<sup>23</sup>. The skald was not present at the king's side during the battle of Stiklastaðir, a fact that also resulted in questions concerning Sigvatr's loyalty. According to the

---

<sup>19</sup> J. Morawiec, *Wstęp*, [in:] *Saga o Hallfredzie skaldzie kłopotliwym*, ed. by J. Morawiec, Wrocław 2011, pp. 47–52.

<sup>20</sup> *Hallfreðar saga*, ed. by. Einarr Ólafur Sveinsson, Íslensk Fornrit VIII, Reykjavík 1939, p. 192.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, p. 192.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, pp. 194–195.

<sup>23</sup> J. Morawiec, *Sigvatr Þórðarson's Vestrfararvísur and Cnut the Great's conquest of Norway in 1028*, "RMN Newsletter" 6 (2013), p. 37; Idem, *Między poezją a polityką*, pp. 222, 381–392.

skald himself and later king's sagas, he was in Rome at that very time and that was where he learnt about Óláfr's death. According to *Heimskringla*: Sigvatr the skald made pilgrimage to Rome the time the battle of Stiklastaðir took place. But on his journey north he learned of the fall of King Óláfr, and that was a great sorrow for him. The news made him compose the following stanza:

*Stóðk á Mont ok mintumk  
morg hvar sundr fló targa  
breið ok brynjur síðar;  
borgum nær of morgin;  
munða ek þanns unði  
(öndverðan brum) löndum  
(faðir minn vas þar þenna  
Þorrøðr) konung forðum.*

where many a broad shield, and long mail-shirts, flew asunder near towns, one morning; I recalled, who once enjoyed, in that period, his lands, Þórðr, my father was there early, the king<sup>24</sup>.

The story continues with an incident that happened shortly afterwards. One day, Sigvatr came through a hamlet and heard a certain farmer wailing loudly because of the death of his wife. He beat his breast and rent his clothes, weeping greatly and saying that he would gladly die. Sigvatr spoke this stanza:

*Fúss læzk maðr, ef missir  
meyjar faðms, at deyja;  
keypt es öst, ef eptir,  
of, látinn skal gráta;  
en fullhugi fellir  
flóttstygg; sás varð dróttin,  
vårt torrek lízk verra,  
vígtár, konungs örum<sup>25</sup>.*

It is quite easy to distinguish already well known elements in the story of Sigvatr. The skald suffers as he lost his lord. The intriguing comparison with a husband losing his beloved wife let Snorri underline the level of emotions Sigvatr was supposed to express at this very moment. Once again, one can talk about the emotional community, constituted by those two, even if Sigvatr claims his loss is bigger. The context of the story allows us to attach another feeling to the situation, namely a fear of the future and lack of stability. In the case of the skald it is the result of a new political reality in Norway. Sigvatr's situation is even worse. The new

---

<sup>24</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla* III, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslensk Fornrit XXVIII, Reykjavík 2002, p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, p. 15.

Danish regime in the country would not welcome him warmly. Moreover, Óláfr's companions who survived the Stiklastaðir catastrophe see him as a coward and traitor. Sigvatr's career at Magnús the Good's court started with self-defence and the declaration of loyalty. In this context it is easier to understand the skald's grief, once again understood only by those who experienced an equally ultimate loss.

The articles of both Goeres and Mills show that despite strictly defined gender roles, the society described in Icelandic sagas could accept, under extraordinary circumstances, examples of behaviour that questioned the social norm. The weeping of men, or, strictly speaking, retainers, on the occasion of the death of a sovereign, is a good example of this. The *hirðmenn* of a deceased ruler were allowed to express their obedience, loyalty, sorrow and grief by a public display of tears that could accompany funerary celebrations.

It is no accident that such displays supplemented the composition of *erfíkvæði*, the kind of poetry dedicated to a deceased patron and which highlighted the exclusive link between him and a skald and rest of the retinue. The poetry itself and episodes listed above point towards a feeling of ultimate loss that could be compared, although not fully, with the loss of a family member. In both cases, a need to underline the special bonds between the deceased and those still living, the view that such a loss cannot be counterbalanced, the lack of safety and the prospect of an uncertain future, form the core of the whole concept<sup>26</sup>.

In the context of political turbulence resulting from the death of a ruler, grief, lamentation and weeping were not only signs of the high esteem that the deceased had been held in, but also expressed the fears and bewilderment of those who were left alive and had to find their place in the new reality.

## Bibliography

- Fidjestøl B., *Det norrøne fyrstediktet*, Bergen 1982, pp. 307–313.  
 Finlay A., *Monstrous Allegations. An Exchange of ýki in Bjarnar saga hitdælakappa*, “Alvissmál” 10 (2001), pp. 21–44.  
*Flateyjarbók. En samling af norske kongesagæer*, Vol. III, Christania 1868.  
 Goeres E.M., *How to do with tears. The Funeral of Magnús inn góði*, “Saga-Book” 27 (2013), pp. 5–26.  
*Hallfreðar saga*, ed. by Einarr Ólafur Sveinsson, Íslenzk Fornrit VIII, Reykjavík 1939, pp. 192.  
 Harris J., *Erfíkvæði – myth, ritual, elegy*, [in:] *Old Norse religion in long-term perspectives*, ed. by A. Andrén, K. Jennbert, C. Raudvere, Lund 2006, pp. 267–272.  
 Mills K., *Grief, Gender, and Genre. Male Weeping in Snorri's Account of Baldr's Death, Kings' Sagas, and Gesta Danorum*, “The Journal of English and German Philology” 113:4 (2014), pp. 472–496.

---

<sup>26</sup> See B. Fidjestøl, *Det norrøne fyrstediktet*, Bergen 1982, pp. 307–313; J. Harris, *Erfíkvæði – myth, ritual, elegy*, [in:] *Old Norse religion in long-term perspectives*, ed. by A. Andrén, K. Jennbert, C. Raudvere, Lund 2006, pp. 267–272; J. Morawiec, *Między poezją a polityką*, pp. 167–205.



- Morawiec J., *Między poezją a polityką. Rozgrywki polityczne w Skandynawii XI wieku w świetle poezji ówczesnych skaldów*, Katowice 2016.
- Morawiec J., *Sigvatr Þórðarson's Vestrfararvísur and Cnut the Great's conquest of Norway in 1028*, "RMN Newsletter" 6 (2013), pp. 31–40.
- Morawiec J., *Wstęp*, [in:] *Saga o Hallfredzie skaldzie kłopotliwym*, ed. by J. Morawiec, Wrocław 2011, pp. 47–52.
- Rosenwein B., *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages*, Ithaca 2006.
- Słupecki L.P., *Mitologia skandynawska w epoce wikingów*, Kraków 2013.
- Snorri Sturluson, *Edda. Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. by A. Faulkes, London 2005.
- Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla* III, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk Fornrit XXVIII, Reykjavík 2002.
- Ström F., *Nid, ergi and Old Norse moral attitudes*, London 1973.

## KILKA PRZEMYŚLEŃ NA TEMAT PŁACZU I MĘSKIEGO ZACHOWANIA W LITERATURZE STARONORDYCKIEJ

### Streszczenie

Świat sag wygląda jak festiwal męskości, w którym oczekuje się właściwego męskiego zachowania i za jego spektakularne przejawy darzy się szacunkiem. To także świat ostrych i dyskryminujących społecznym podziałów między rolami mężczyzn i kobiet w codziennym życiu. Owa reglamentacja obejmuje między innymi także emocje i sposób ich wyrażania. Tak więc dwa przypadki męskiego płaczu, odnotowane w staronordyckich relacjach, spowodowane śmiercią boga Baldr i Magnusa Dobrego, króla Norwegii i Danii, do dziś intrygują uczonych. Celem artykułu jest zarówno wypowiedź na temat bardzo niedawnego wkładu analizy tego wątku w literaturę tematu, jak i refleksja nad możliwymi rozszerzeniami jego interpretacji w ramach sagi.