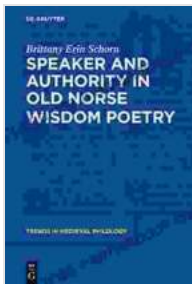


# Speaker and Authority in Old Norse Wisdom Poetry: Trends in Medieval Philology 34

Old Norse wisdom poetry, also known as gnomic poetry, is a rich body of verse that offers insights into the values, beliefs, and worldview of the medieval Scandinavians. These poems often take the form of short, pithy sayings or proverbs and can be found in a variety of sources, including the Poetic Edda, the Hávamál, and the Old Norse sagas.

One of the most striking features of Old Norse wisdom poetry is the use of the first-person speaker. In many of these poems, the speaker presents himself as a wise and experienced individual who offers advice and guidance to the audience. This speaker can take on a variety of roles, from that of a father or elder to that of a god or sage.



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(Trends in Medieval Philology Book 34) by Valerie M. Pontbriand

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The authority of the speaker in Old Norse wisdom poetry is often derived from his or her age, experience, and social status. In some cases, the speaker may also claim to have received divine inspiration or knowledge. This authority can be used to support the speaker's claims and to persuade the audience to accept his or her advice.

However, the authority of the speaker in Old Norse wisdom poetry is not always absolute. In some poems, the speaker's claims are challenged or even rejected by the audience. This can lead to a more complex and nuanced understanding of the poem's meaning and message.

### **The Speaker as a Wise Elder**

In many Old Norse wisdom poems, the speaker presents himself as a wise and experienced elder who offers advice and guidance to the younger generation. This speaker can be a father, grandfather, or other respected member of the community. His or her authority is derived from his or her age and experience, as well as from his or her knowledge of traditional wisdom and lore.

One example of this type of speaker can be found in the *Hávamál*, a collection of wisdom sayings attributed to the god Odin. In one stanza, Odin advises his son to "beware of the ale-bench, for there evil words are spoken, and many a quarrel is begun." This advice is based on Odin's own experience and observation of the dangers of excessive drinking.

Another example of a wise elder speaker can be found in the Old Norse saga *Völsunga saga*. In this saga, the hero Sigurd is visited by the wise old man Regin, who offers him advice and guidance on how to slay the dragon

Fafnir. Regin's authority is derived from his age, experience, and knowledge of magic.

### **The Speaker as a God or Sage**

In some Old Norse wisdom poems, the speaker presents himself as a god or sage who possesses divine wisdom and knowledge. This speaker can offer advice and guidance on a wide range of topics, from the nature of the universe to the conduct of human affairs.

One example of this type of speaker can be found in the Poetic Edda, a collection of mythological poems. In the poem "Hávamál," Odin himself appears as the speaker and offers advice on a variety of topics, including warfare, love, and wisdom. Odin's authority is derived from his status as the All-Father, the chief god of the Norse pantheon.

Another example of a divine speaker can be found in the Old Norse saga Snorri Sturluson's Edda. In this saga, the god Heimdallr appears as the speaker and offers advice on a variety of topics, including the nature of the gods and the end of the world. Heimdallr's authority is derived from his status as the guardian of the Bifrost, the bridge between Asgard and Midgard.

### **The Speaker as a Fool or Trickster**

In some Old Norse wisdom poems, the speaker presents himself as a fool or trickster who uses humor and satire to make his or her point. This speaker can often be found in the company of the gods or other powerful beings, and he or she uses his or her wit to challenge authority and expose hypocrisy.

One example of this type of speaker can be found in the Poetic Edda, a collection of mythological poems. In the poem "Lokasenna," the trickster god Loki appears as the speaker and insults and challenges the other gods. Loki's authority is derived from his cunning and his ability to see through the facades of others.

Another example of a fool or trickster speaker can be found in the Old Norse saga *Hrólfs saga kraka*. In this saga, the hero Hrólfr Kraki is visited by the fool Gestumblindi, who offers him advice and guidance on how to rule his kingdom. Gestumblindi's authority is derived from his wit and his ability to see the truth behind appearances.

### **The Challenge to Authority**

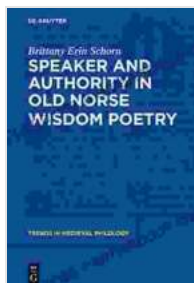
In some Old Norse wisdom poems, the speaker's authority is challenged or even rejected by the audience. This can lead to a more complex and nuanced understanding of the poem's meaning and message.

One example of this type of poem can be found in the Poetic Edda, a collection of mythological poems. In the poem "Sigurðarkviða hin skamma," the hero Sigurd is visited by the wise old man Regin, who offers him advice on how to slay the dragon Fafnir. Sigurd initially accepts Regin's advice, but he later comes to realize that Regin is not to be trusted. Sigurd then challenges Regin's authority and kills him.

Another example of a poem in which the speaker's authority is challenged can be found in the Old Norse saga *Völsunga saga*. In this saga, the hero Sigurd is visited by the wise old woman Brynhild, who offers him advice on how to slay the dragon Fafnir. Sigurd initially accepts Brynhild's advice, but

he later comes to realize that she is not to be trusted. Sigurd then challenges Brynhild's authority and kills her.

The speaker in Old Norse wisdom poetry is a complex and multifaceted figure who can take on a variety of roles. The speaker's authority can be derived from his or her age, experience, social status, divine inspiration, or knowledge. However, the speaker's authority is not always absolute and can be challenged or even rejected by the audience. This can lead to a more complex and nuanced understanding of the poem's meaning and message.



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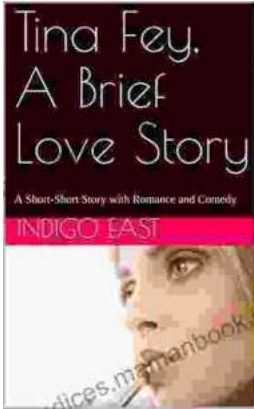
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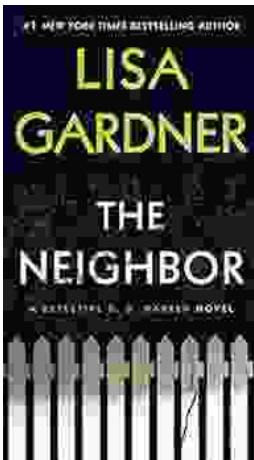
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