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THE FIRST ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF
THE OLD ICELANDIC *DRÁPA AF MARÍUGRÁT*

Kellinde Wrightson

Very little attention has been paid to the Old Icelandic skaldic poem *Drápa af Maríugrát* (*Maríugrátr* for short), or indeed to any of the extant Old Icelandic skaldic poems on the Virgin Mary. This is perhaps partly due to the view of some scholars in the past that Old Icelandic Christian poetry is not as interesting in content or as good in literary value as the older heroic poetry (Hollander 1945, 22; Einarsson [1957] 1969, 70). Today this view is changing, however, and scholars are making exciting finds in the corpus of Icelandic religious poetry (Frank 1985, 161). In relation to the extant Icelandic Marian literature, there is a good deal of research currently under way.¹ It is appropriate that as part of this change the skaldic poems on the Virgin should be given their due.

It is high time that *Maríugrátr* was exposed to a more conservative editorial approach and to a more comprehensive analysis of its contents. None of the five previous editors of this poem exercised much restraint in emending the text (see Thorkelsson 1888, Kahle 1898, Sperber 1911, Jónsson [1908-15] 1967(A) and 1973(B), and Kock 1946-50). In the forthcoming edition, from which the following translation was made, the text is basically maintained as it stands in the manuscripts unless it makes absolutely no sense or is grammatically incorrect or is completely out-of-place metrically. Further, this poem has never been exposed to a comprehensive analysis of its thematic, structural, stylistic, lexical, or generic contents. Although there is one major analytical work on Icelandic Marian poetry, which contains a section on *Maríugrátr*, this

is the only work of its kind (Schottmann 1973). Finally, and of particular interest to this article, *Mariugrátr* has never before been translated into English, nor indeed has it ever been edited in English. The relevance of an edition and translation in English is to make this poem and others like it more accessible to those who are interested in Marian studies and its related areas but who do not read Icelandic. The translation of *Mariugrátr* that follows and the edition of this poem and other skaldic poems on the Virgin, which is currently under way, will contribute to the existing body of knowledge about medieval religious poetry in general and Marian poetry in particular.

Before moving to the translation itself, a brief introduction to the background of the poem should be noted. *Mariugrátr* was composed in Iceland by an unknown author around the end of the fourteenth/beginning of the fifteenth centuries—a time when literature on Mary's lamentation was very popular. The only extant medieval manuscript containing this poem is AM 713 quarto which is held at the Arni Magnusson Institute in Reykjavik, Iceland, and is dated from the first half of the sixteenth century (Kálund 1889, 2:128). The manuscript containing an "original" text of this poem, therefore, has not survived or has not yet been found. There are two paper manuscripts containing this poem—AM 1032 quarto and AM 920 quarto—both of which were written by or for Arni Magnusson in the eighteenth century. The text in AM 1032 almost completely agrees with that in AM 713 and was probably copied from that manuscript. The text in AM 920, however, contains many variations. On the whole, the text in AM 713 is in good order with very few lacunæ, is for the most part semantically coherent, and therefore has required little emendation.

To date, two possible sources for *Mariugrátr* have been identified (Kahle 1898, 8): one is a vernacular sequence in *Mariu saga* called 'Sequitur planctus siue lamenticio beate Marie' (Unger 1871, 1003-1012); the other is a Latin treatise of which two versions are known to me: 'Tractatus beati Bernhadi de planctu beate Marie' (Mushacke 1890, 41-53) and 'Liber de passione Christi et doloribus et planctibus matris ejus' (Migne 1844-1864, 182:1133-1142). This Latin treatise was formerly attributed to Saint Bernard of Clairvaux but has lately been attributed to another Cistercian, Ogerius de Locedio (Barre 1952).²

In the translating process adopted here, the poem has been rendered into prose because it is impossible and perhaps pointless to try to transfer the metrical features of Old Icelandic skaldic poetry (especially its alliteration, rhyme, and complex syntax) into English verse. The kennings,

however, have been retained in the translation with the meaning of each kenning supplied in square brackets [], except where the meaning is obvious, such as "the son of God" (= Christ) or "the mother of the Lord" (= Mary). Explanations of the translation are enclosed in parentheses. Each paragraph in the translation corresponds to one stanza in the poem; likewise, the numbers preceding each paragraph correspond to the numbers of each stanza. The translation is as literal as possible in the hope of presenting a reasonably close picture of the meaning of the Icelandic. When reading the translation it should be remembered that it is designed to be used as a vehicle for understanding one particular interpretation of *Mariugrátr* and is not intended to be definitive. Ideally, it should be read in conjunction with my forthcoming edition with explanatory and textual notes, which will constitute my doctoral thesis at the University of Sydney.

A Praise Poem on The Virgin's Lament

1. My Redeemer, generous with speech, give plenty of words to your skald for the praise of your mother famous for her benevolence and to save my soul; you showed Aaron's kinsman [Moses] a bush, yet that cold bush never burned; let the flame of the Lord of the shrine of lightning [heaven; Christ; the Holy Spirit] kindle in my heart.

2. I willingly wished to compose a glorious praise poem about the mother of the ruler of heaven; sorrowful, I hope the magnificent repository of the Holy Spirit [the Virgin] accepts the poem which I have labored over; you, who hold all creation in the palm of your hand, give me a word or two which I will crave so that I might compose again as before to her glory.

3. So the time has come, glorious prince of the bright sun [Christ], that I intend to praise you who give an abundance of delight to all if they abandon their sins; I cannot be satisfied with any word unless you both, true God and the most blessed mother, wish to assist me; I will cry and repent of my faults.

4. In beautiful prayers, charitable and wise Augustine very often asked Mary, more beautiful and more famous than anything, that she should manifest herself; he wanted to be able to explain the true message about her sorrow which she received when the prince of heaven [Christ] endured distress and torture until death.

5. A noble keeper of good clerics (i.e. Augustine) said "let us, learned and lay people, give praise to the mother of the Lord, let us bathe our eyes and cheeks in tears"; I pray that the most excellent mother of the

Lord will grant me all good things, that resplendent virgin who gave birth to Jesus, who is yet to illumine this world.

6. The son of God drank from both your breasts, glorious blessed virgin; you brought the ruler (i.e. Christ) into the temple after the fixed number of days in accordance with the Old Testament (i.e. Lev. 12.2-8); the mighty woman and mother of the Lord offers the excellent keeper of heaven; Simeon and the holy Anna proclaimed your son the true God.

7. Afterwards, woman, you fled with your son away from an encounter with Herod; that malicious man wanted to kill him if he could find him; on earth, you, merciful one, more famous than anything, bore the joy of all mankind in your arms; you, Mary, brought him up and clothed him.

8. No one can wonder that a virgin and mother wanted to follow the merciful Redeemer—so the maple tree of fire [man], Augustine, related to a host of people; “I, a noble ruler of priests, rely upon it and believe it that the excellent woman never parted from her only son, the prince of heaven, whom the Jews subjected to torture.”

9. The sweet maiden and most excellent queen of the seat of time [heaven; the Virgin], gentle and beautiful as well as luminous and noble, came in her glory to meet the master and keeper of monks (i.e. Augustine); then the glorious mother of the king of the field of the sun [heaven; Christ; the Virgin] showed herself to Augustine with great light, with perfume and sweet odour, in beautiful apparel.

10. Mary greeted the captain of mitres (i.e. Augustine): “You are a valuable friend of the keeper of angels [Christ] and mine in truth;” In this way the blessed mother of mercy [the Virgin] speaks to the learned man; “you pray like no others have exhorted before on this stony land; being sublime I together with the holy favorer of mankind [Christ] shall willingly fulfill your wish.

11. “It is distressing to tell people about the grief and sorrow which I yet experienced on Good Friday when the shaft-shakers [soldiers] nailed the king of the sun [Christ] onto the cross; afterwards, when the holy dealer of destiny [Christ] led me home to heaven, angels sang sweet praise for me morning and night, and my grief was brought to an end.

12. “On that Friday, together with my two sisters and likewise Mary Magdalene, I was the first to follow famous Christ, our Lord; when Pilate sentenced the son of God to slaughter and death at the wish of the people, the Jews led him away, mocked him, laughed at him, rejoiced at

that point and slew him.

13. "For certain I saw the Redeemer of sky and heaven himself [Christ] carry the post of the salvation [cross], the tree of mankind [cross], on his own shoulder as torture which the Jews brought about: I relieved him as best I could—I put my hands under the cross; I was eager to accompany my holy God to the torture place.

14. "The Jews attacked and spat on him with ferocity and scorn for a long time; they bound, injured, beat, and scoffed at the one who is both man and our true God; the king's men carried out many kinds of tortures on the leader of glory [Christ]; I make this clear—that my breast and shoulders bore that sorrow to the extent that I could not walk.

15. "Men lifted the king of the sun [Christ] onto the cross and drove spikes of steel into the insteps of his feet and his palms; a great fainting fit seized me; I could not move myself at all because of affliction and sorrow as if I were dead and I lay in this way for a long time full of grief; I bathed my eyelashes and cheeks in tears."

16. Listen, controller of the hall of stars [heaven; God], I would be ready to bring you a very excellent refrain if I could come upon a supply of words by the Lord's will: the eternal distributor of fate [God] is higher and more blessed than all things, may there be glory for him in heaven and on earth; he is higher than anything at all.

17. There are very many grievous words of Mary, the mighty mother of the Lord, to tell people, and the virtuous woman told still more as follows: "It was just like a shining sword stood right through my heart when I saw all Christ's injuries and the blood from his wounds.

18. "Eager to help, the captain of angels [Christ] who hung on the cross looked at me sweetly and asked me to stop crying: 'We will see each other on the third day; be assured that I will rise up from the dead' so says the prince of the bright sun [Christ], 'believe it my mother; remember that I will find you' "

19. Christ was tortured, beaten and bound; blood spurted onto the mother of Jesus; then the most blessed and sweetest Mary saw all the wounds of the Lord; no functioning tongue of any sinful person is able to describe before an audience the grief and misery which the most excellent virgin and mother of the keeper of angels [Christ; the Virgin] bore then.

20. The glorious, blessed prince of the field of angels [heaven; Christ] is better than all things; all people are obliged to praise the controller of lightning [Christ/God] in the most glorious way: the most eternal distributor of fate [God] is higher and more blessed than all things;

may there be glory for him in heaven and on earth; he is higher than anything at all.

21. "Men made a tight and hard crown of thorns for the controller of heaven [Christ], then the cursed Jews offered it to him with shame and mocking and other such things; my heart was stirred up when I saw this because my dear glorious son appreciated my misery much more than his own tortures."

22. So for her part the blessed bride of the prince of the wind-vault [heaven; Christ; the Virgin], merciful, more famous than all womankind, addresses baptized people: "Where do you know of a mortal woman who bears sorrow more than the mother of the Lord? Truly it is as if the shining, strong steel (i.e., sword) penetrates my heart.

23. "The king of the land of the sun [heaven; Christ] took torture and death upon himself for the salvation of Christian people; being sinless he took it at his own will with complete delight; all people must thank God for this," said the mother of the Lord, "learned people should continuously adorn him with various songs to his praise and glory."

24. Every Friday baptized people should remember the killing and death of the son of God with sorrow and fear, in song and sincere tears, as a defense against evil: the most eternal distributor of fate [God] is higher and more blessed than all things; may there be glory for him in heaven and on earth; he is higher than anything at all.

25. Listen to what holy Mary said to Jesus who was resplendent from salvation: "O prince of the land of clouds [heaven; Christ], never let me be separated from you alive or dead; it is to be expected that I love my only son, virtuous Christ, more than those women love theirs who give birth to their children in sin with sorrow and torment."

26. The mighty controller of the beings of the path of the moon [heaven; angels; Christ] answers his mother: "Highest virgin, John the Apostle will take care of you while you live on this earth; most excellent mother, do not weep for my torture nor for my painful torment; being eager for showing mercy, I will redeem mankind and the world in doing this," said the adorer of angels [Christ].

27. "I have decided to take care of you, mother; I will rise up from the dead," said the king of the sun [Christ], "I will lead us to life, I will desire to see you first; be happy, you who are beneficent in your powers because I will come to you from bright heaven; with delight I shall willingly appoint for you the seat next to me in splendid heaven."

28. May the glorious, prosperous hall of the king of heaven [Christ;

the Virgin], the chosen repository of the keeper of mankind [Christ; the Virgin], and the power of the Divinity, give me words for your refrains: Blessed Mary, virgin and mother of the supreme king of all kings, governs and directs all good things in the halls of heaven beside our Lord.

29. "Listen, people," said holy Mary, "how I paid attention to these words; the sorrow was ever the greater for me as my Lord's life began to wane; before my eyes Longinus stabbed the teacher in the side, then I bore such great distress in my breast that I was on the point of death.

30. "It is necessary to tell what the prince of the land of the moon [heaven; Christ] said in agony at his death: 'I thirst' said the highest Lord of heaven; that can never be forgotten; the men of the grove of spears [soldiers] offer the creator of mankind [Christ] sour wine mixed with gall when he has craved vinegar, and I had true sorrow in my heart.

31. "I heard the prince of the sun [Christ] speak at the very end as I can still relate; 'Oh eternal father, I entrust my spirit to your hands, said the distributor of fate [Christ]"; glorious Jesus died for the redemption of all people on Good Friday, as the gospels explain; learned people sing the praise of God and teach it to others.

32. The mighty and generous Lord still gives all that is good to his mother; he is glorious and more excellent than all things; may there be prosperity and peace for our Creator: blessed Mary, virgin and mother of the supreme king of all kings, governs and directs all good things in the halls of heaven beside our Lord.

33. Listen to what sweet holy Mary said to the steersman of symbols (i.e. Augustine): "Every senseless creature, along with women and men, feared the death of the Creator; the earth shook and rocks burst; people experienced darkness in this world; similarly the sweet sun lost its brightness and could not shine.

34. "A benevolent disciple called Joseph took the body of our Redeemer, glorious Christ, from the cross and wrapped it in a cloth, and then I was near it; we, my sisters and Magdalene, wanted to embrace and kiss the dead ruler of the land of the moon [heaven; Christ]," so says the very wise mother of the Lord.

35. "Afterwards the bushes of the plumb line [men] buried the body of the ruler of the sun [Christ] in a tomb; my sorrow was very severe when I lost Jesus; there was never any support for me: so it went on for a long time," said the mother of the king, "such that I could not walk; I wanted to rest at the tomb of the ruler of the tent of the cloudless sky [heaven; Christ], of the ruler of the domain of heaven [heaven; Christ].

36. "I alone was assured that virtuous Christ would rise on that Friday." Since that time people hold this day in glory for her: Blessed Mary, virgin and mother of the supreme king of all kings, governs and directs all good things in the halls of heaven beside our Lord.

37. O king of the promising road of the bright sun [heaven; Christ], give me beautiful words for the conclusion of this poem; choose a pleasant work of art for your mother's poem; "Keep listening to me, Augustine," said the mother of Jesus, "you who wept beautiful tears which were full of goodness so that I would tell you my secret powers (i.e., miracles).

38. "The brave king of the stronghold of rain [heaven; Christ], who rose from the dead on Easter morning, showed me all his sores and wounds before he showed them to others and I was happy; so beneficent God wanted to exchange joy for my weeping; the keeper of the carriage [God] gives me everything which I will require on earth and in heaven."

39. The most glorious virgin said "May people feel pity for me because of my lamentation, your joy is life with tears and repentance of sins," says the gemstone of women [the Virgin]; "Jesus of Nazareth received a violent death at his own will because of your need; pray for redemption and joy from the king of the sun [Christ]."

40. Perform good deeds by weeping before the sign of the passion of the father of God [cross, Christ]; people often remember the wounds of the son of God with tears in song and prayers, bow down before learned people for a long time in confession; may people bathe their eyes and cheeks out of a tearful breast full of painful repentance.

41. The mother of the lord of the land of the moon [heaven; Christ; the Virgin] revealed to a learned monk (i.e., Augustine) her five joys which famous wise men always remember; the comfort and salvation of mankind [the Virgin], virtuous, kind and benevolent, began to count with joy and delight before this brother; she who destroys harm tells this.

42. Early every day I will hear the five chief joys with the greeting of the mother of the king (i.e., the Ave Maria); I pray that my wise people remember these words; I will teach all of those words which are true and read them out to learned people; next it is obligatory that all Christian people should learn proper prayers.

43. "I tell of the first and highest joy: an angel of the prince of the sun [Christ; Gabriel] found me; He sent the sublime Holy Spirit to me with joy and delight; I rejoiced then when the Creator of the land of clouds [heaven; Christ], the master of everything, put on my flesh

under my breast; so I was the virgin of God on which day I was afraid.

44. "I find my second joy: on Christmas night I gave birth to Christ who remedied the world according to the wish of God alone for the enhancement of the soul for all mankind: after that I count yet the third joy: the glorious king of the enclosure of the thaw wind [heaven, Christ], who is mighty and wise, rose from the dead on Easter morning as I could see.

45. "Beneficent God ascended from the stony earth into bright heaven; the eternal praiseworthy distributor of fate [Christ] sits in glory forever and ever; my glorious son, God, came towards me accompanied by all his excellent court of sublime glory [angels]; he raised me up in the palm of his hand.

46. "I shall lead you, Mary my mother,' said the gatherer of fate [Christ], 'to glory, honor and power, and to the highest embellishment of heaven—I shall appoint you the seat next to me'; I received much greater glory from the guardian of the bridge of the moon [heaven; Christ] than any human breast can imagine even though it may know many good things," so speaks the most excellent sublime woman.

47. "Please," said magnificent Mary, "may people make me happy with the greeting of an angel; I wish that *Dominus tecum* always plays on people's tongues; they will receive in return a small reward here if they pray to the keeper of heaven for the health and cure of the sick; I promise you that He shall grant mercy."

48. Such promises from her are very good for people, but every person should release tears, holy prayers and sincere repentance from a tearful heart; we shall honor the magnificent king of the hall of rain [heaven; God] for our redemption; may the whole of mankind and the mother of the Lord glorify him in heaven and on earth.

49. It is dry around my heart though the inlets of my eyelids [tears] run from my eyes, so it is falseness and grievous increase of sins if I praise such tears; O king of the storm shrine [heaven; God], let the water of salvation [tears] be allotted to me so that I may have adequate tears; may the bath of my eyelids [tears] stream out from my eyes together with holy prayers.

50. One should worship the most excellent keeper of heaven [God] as much as possible; it is a duty for baptized people; he is the true creator of all mankind; O dearest Lord give me glory so that I will meet with a clean hour of death, in such a way that foul spirits will not find any sins in me.

51. O Christ and the blessed mother, I pray to you that you both

will reward me for this poem when I die; O teacher stand by me then; glorious Lord Jesus, take my soul away from the severe battle of devils into your grace, then I will receive rewards for my praise poem.

52. Oh blessed honor-adorned controller of the sun [Christ], save me at the Last Judgement; O praiseworthy Lord, I ask you to transfer every virtue in you to all mankind; I pray that all people who hear this lamentation poem remember Mary's verse (i.e. the Ave Maria) and read it with tears and remember the mother of God and the death of the Lord and his blood. Amen.

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NOTES

1. There are several scholars known to me who are currently working on the Old Icelandic Mary material—among them are: Katrina Attwood at the University of Leeds who is carrying out a codicological study of AM 757a quarto which contains *Mariudrápa* among other religious poems; Þórsteinn Bjárnason at the National Library of Iceland who is working on an edition of post-reformation Mary poems in Icelandic and Latin; Wilhelm Heizmann at the University of Göttingen who is working on a diplomatic edition and analysis of *Mariu saga* (excluding the miracle texts) for his *Habilitationschrift* and who is preparing the Stockholm manuscript Number 11 quarto containing *Mariu saga* for a forthcoming volume in the *Early Icelandic Manuscripts in Facsimile* series (Loth 1958 ff.); Vésteinn Olason at the University of Iceland who is working on religious poetry including Mary poems for a forthcoming volume of *Islensk Bókmenntasaga* (Nordal et al. 1992); and Laura Tomassini at the University of Copenhagen who is researching the stylistics of *Mariu saga* (excluding the miracle texts) and plans to publish Danish and English translations of the saga.

2. This information is based on Schottmann's comments as I have not yet acquired a copy of this article myself (1973, 505).