

## **Russell Poole**

In constructing and theorizing literary history one can reckon with two complementary forces. On the one hand, we have the agency of individual authors, adaptors, translators, redactors, and so forth, as they produce successive instantiations of a given body of story-material. On the other hand, we can postulate a trans-individual process where the development of bodies of story-material (say, the matter of France versus the matter of the North) occurs in a complex dynamic of competition; each body can be seen, in Darwinian fashion, as seeking to perpetuate itself.

In exemplifying these points and tying them to the objectives of research stated for the Mediality project, I shall refer to illustrative material from *Merlínússpá*, Gunnlaugr Leifsson's free translation and adaptation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Prophetia Merlini*. Gunnlaugr was a monk at Þingeyrar and composed this poem around the turn of the C13th.

Within a rich context of medieval prophetic and vaticinary poetry produced both inside and beyond Iceland, *Merlínússpá* can be seen to absorb and outdo other prophetic works. The text has this competitive edge in part because it is not just prophetic but 'meta-prophetic', in a way that its vernacular competitors are not. By this I mean that it reflects upon its own form and content in a sophisticated fashion, invoking criteria such as intelligibility, compendiousness, and good taste.

At the same time, *Merlínússpá* has competitiveness in another sense. It is intrinsically usable by a wide variety of consumers in a wide variety of ways. At the outset of its life, Gunnlaugr has to negotiate his composition with patrons and authorities, in an instance of what has been called 'socialization of the text', to ensure its usability. It lends itself to use variously as prophecy, as history, and as genealogy. It can adapt to insertion within a larger compilation or narrative as well as to separate performance. Also, as Gunnlaugr tells us, it is composed in middle style, which carries with it the flexibility to extend into fully 'aureate' diction as well as into the outright colloquial. In these respects, too, the concept of 'socialization of the text' is highly relevant.

By examining the text as accommodated to *Hauksbók*, its one extant witness, we can gain some insight into these aspects of production and consumption.