Chickens in the North:
A Retrospective

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In a roundtable where the question of genre was discussed in relationship to fornaldarsögur, the scholar to whom this piece is dedicated revealed a perhaps surprising penchant for things gallinaceous. The revelation was as follows:

I have a book at home entitled Cluck! The True Story of Chickens in the Cinema (Fink, 1981) in which every movie in which a chicken – living or dead – appears, or in which words such as ‘chicken’, ‘hen’ or ‘rooster’ are mentioned, is listed and rated. Although rather extreme (and not entirely serious), is this really any more far-fetched than grouping narratives according to where and when they take place?¹

Perhaps on this auspicious occasion it is neither too ‘far-fetched’ nor ‘extreme’ to consider the task of categorising poultry appearances in Old Norse-Icelandic literature and considering how the chicken in question might lead us to a greater understanding of generic categories.

Chickens, like fornaldarsögur, are something of a generic hybrid. While from a purely scientific point of view they are most certainly avian, in the common conception however they find a more ready home alongside cows and pigs as farmyard animals (a connection strengthened by the groundedness of the flightless bird). Perhaps it is this dual character which problematises the easy representation of henkind in various types of text. Space prevents anything but the most cursory of overviews.

In the lists presented in the ‘Skáldskaparmál’ section of Snorra Edda pride of place is given to the raven and the eagle. It seems that the chicken is not of use when extolling the virtues of a great lord or recounting deeds of derring-do. Nevertheless, in two texts, those contained in AM 748 I b 4to and AM 757 a 4to, a list of ‘hana heiti’ can be found amongst the additional þulur appended to the canonical text. The list is as follows:

Fegringr hani
fialarr ok aslákr
kokr salgofnir
kambr viðofnir
gylmir gallvs
ok gallina
høna keila
habroc kaða.²

The words for ‘chicken’, ‘hen’ and ‘rooster’ are here listed but not rated (neither will there be an attempt at translation, for fear of producing something x-rated).

² Edda Snorra Sturlusonar, vol. 2 (Copenhagen: J. D. Qvist, 1852), 488.
Swans, eagles and hawks all make their presence felt in mythic narratives, often associated with divine or supernatural beings through a process of metamorphosis. Maria Elena Ruggerini has discussed some of these divine flights.\(^3\) The chicken, alas, is excluded – she cannot take wing and would thus be an unfitting alias in a high-speed aerial pursuit involving a disgruntled giant. She does raise her head, however, in the form of the god Hænir. Little is known of him, though we are told by Snorri that he can be referred to as “sessa eða sinna eða mála Óðins ok hinn skjóta Ás ok hinn langa fót ok aurkonung”.\(^4\) His most memorable appearance is in the story of his encounter with Þjazi, along with Óðinn and Loki, which ultimately leads to the purloining of the gods’ apples of immortality. While his role in the story seems minor as presented in \textit{Snorra Edda} and \textit{Haustlǫng}, Richard North has explained the exchanges which take place in terms of the bird symbolism of the characters. Þjazi is in the form of an eagle and Hænir’s feathered double comes to look insignificant in comparison. Loki is called ‘holls vinar Hœnis’ and North says that he (that is, Loki):

... takes a violent dislike to Þjazi out of protectiveness towards Hœnir (i.e. ‘cockerel’), a smaller bird to whom ... the eagle speaks first. Now Loki’s epithet tells us that he suffers for his loyalty. Loki suffers because he was \textit{holllr} to Hœnir but not to Þjazi.\(^5\)

Throwing one’s lot in with a chicken, it would seem, is ill-advised. In the Íslendingasögur the chicken is perhaps most present in the tale of Hænsa-Þórir (a footnote in the Íslenzk Fornrit edition states that “[a]lifuglaræktar er fremur sjaldan getið í fornöld”). There we are told:

Þórir hét maðr; hann var snauðr at fé ok eigi mjök vinsæll af alþýðu manna. Hann lagði þat í vanða sinn, at hann fór með sumarkaup sitt heraða í milli ok seldi þat í ðöru er hann keypti í ðöru, ok grœddisk honum brátt fé af kaupum sínum. Ok eitt sinn, er Þórir fór sunnan um heiði, hafði hann með sér hœns í fyr norðr um land ok seldi þau með ðörum kaupskap, ok því var hann kallaðr Hœnsa-Þórir.6

It is immediately apparent that Þórir is not presented in a positive light. He is stingy and grasping. While the story of the journey from which Þórir ‘the poulterer’ receives his nickname, could be false etymologizing – the selling of fowl might seem to be a strange activity to reprove somebody for – one may assume that the nickname is not fortuitous, given this context. The chicken is not a generous beast.

In riddarasögur the chicken mostly appears roasting upon a spit, suggestive of the lavish adornments of the chivalrous life. It seems it fares better dead than alive. And so it is that this brief overview has shown that the humble chicken comes off rather poorly as a whole in septentrional literature. Nevertheless, to turn our eyes from objects of study which others scorn is not generous in a scholar. We should look upon both the fair and the fowl with a balanced and judicious

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eye. Moreover, a sense of humour, always present in the work of the dedicatee, is always a welcome addition.