

Encyclopædica Britannica;

ELLER, ET ANTAL

FREMSTILLINGER

OM

de fkiønne og nyttige

V I D E N S K A B E R,

I HVILKE DISKURSER

diverse Phænomeners

BESKRIVELSER & FORKLARINGER gives

TILLIGE MED

adskillige befunderlige og færdeeles OBSERVATIONER, ^{o^a}
i Øst og Vest

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Florian Grammel, Jonna Louis-Jensen og Ragnheiður Mósedóttir*

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THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF TEACHING EAST NORSE TO THE BRITISH

JON ADAMS

(l. 4) ... þa skal kvighu taka otamæ ok flytiæ up a bæsing ...

“Rachel, could you start translating from line four please?”

“Then the heifer shall take ... untamed ...? oh, some savages ...!
and move them to the ... hapax legomenon ...”

As this example (almost) taken from real life shows, the wonders of East Norse are sometimes lost – or improved upon? – by those students beginning their study of the language. Often the student feels him or herself to be lost in an alien world of strange vocabulary and grammar. The terminology used in the field is also unfamiliar. When Rachel was asked to explain what a hapax legomenon was, she replied that it is probably Norse for a fortress or maybe the name of a chieftain. I didn’t dare ask whether she knew what a heifer was.

Fortunately, however, Rachel is not typical of many of the excellent students who do study East Norse, that often over-looked branch of the mighty Norse tree. I had the pleasure of teaching for a number of years at the University of Hull, a time during which Britta offered invaluable advice, support and encouragement. Year in and year out the students and I would survey the usual collection

of texts – law texts, medical handbooks, St Birgitta’s revelations and other religious works, romances, chronicles and so on. Unwisely perhaps, I always introduced East Norse language and literature chronologically, beginning with the rather grammatically complex early law texts and finishing with the sixteenth-century romances. The horror-stricken students were thus confronted on Day One with terrifying concepts such as grammatical case, the use of the subjunctive, subjectless clauses as well as weak and strong nouns.

For mother-tongue English speakers, even grasping a concept such as grammatical gender can be tricky. Indeed, the distinction of gender in words – especially things rather than people – seems a ridiculous, unnecessary remnant of some barbarous stage of society and language. Things aren’t living beings, so how can they have a gender?! The fact that adjectives and nouns need to agree for gender (not to mention case, number and definiteness) serves only to prove the fact that the language is infested with primitive illogicality. Surely, if speakers were civilised enough (and here, dear reader, you may hear strains of *Land of Hope and Glory* in the background), they would just all agree to use the same word order and there would be no need to make connections between words by using these numerous and complicated endings. And why can’t a noun just be a noun anyway? Why does it have to be a masculine a-stem noun? Or a feminine \bar{o} -stem? Or some other stem? What is a stem? A colleague of mine was once challenged for being sexist during a class on language history, when he described *kvinna* as a weak feminine noun.

So it seems to me, that us Britishers are faced with a “double whammy” when learning East Norse. Firstly, the unfamiliar grammar, and secondly, the abstruse terminology to describe the unfamiliar grammar. There may be no way round this. Instead, teach-

ers need to focus on the joys of East Norse: what the texts can tell us about medieval society (one need only think of “Lekarerrätten” quoted above!); the wonderful characters and descriptions we come across (the dwarf-king Laurin, Johannes the Priest’s fantastical kingdom, or St Birgitta’s description of God as a piece of cheese to name a few); and the deep insights into the human condition we can find in East Norse literature (how true! when Peder Laale writes *Thet ær siælsywnit at see hwidh raffn* – I’m not quite sure what he’s getting at, but he has certainly hit the nail on the head; and as far as nails and heads are concerned, we can learn from him that *thet ær got at somme nar een andhen holler howedet oppæ*). There is surely no better way of nurturing the subject, than to throw light into the dark mysterious corners of East Norse, to edit manuscripts with the highest degree of precision and integrity, and to publish ground-breaking research on Old Danish and Old Swedish manuscripts, texts and language. This is precisely what Britta has been doing over the years, and on behalf of my former students and myself, I would like to express our deepest gratitude and to wish her many happy returns on the occasion of her sixtieth birthday!