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**CALL FOR PAPERS AND BOOK REVIEWS**
A Note on the Issue

I am grateful to John J. Han, editor of *Intégrité: A Faith and Learning Journal*, for proposing this special issue on “Christianity and the Literature of the Vikings.” Old Norse scholarship engages some of the most vibrant literature in the medieval period, and I hope that *Intégrité*’s readership will enjoy the articles included here and, perhaps, seek out some of these primary texts for their own literary edification. While studies in Old Norse literature can be wonderfully diverting, they also tend to be highly specialized and technical. In view of this, we have taken a few steps to ensure that this issue is accessible.

First, each article begins with an abstract to provide context as well as a concise statement of that article’s argument. The reader will also notice that the names of Icelandic authors are listed in the Works Cited page by first name. This convention stems from the patronymic names that many Icelanders possess by which a person is identified not through a combination of forename and surname but by forename and patronymic, which usually consists of his or her father’s forename and the suffix –son (son) or –dóttir (daughter).

Finally, a number of articles included in this issue cite primary sources in the original Old Norse. I include below a pronunciation guide for some of the more unusual characters. The pronunciation corresponds to the Modern Icelandic pronunciation of these characters as it appears in Michael Barnes’s *A New Introduction to Old Norse*, Part I, Grammar (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2008, p. 14-18).

- á as in English *now*
- í as in English *eat*
- ó as in American *roam*
- ø, ø, ö as in French *peur*
- ð (þ) as in English *think*
- ð (þ) as in English *this*
- æ as in English *my*
- j as in English *year*
Introduction

Matthew R. Bardowell

What does the literature of the Vikings have to do with faith and learning? This is a reasonable question for Intégrité readers to ask. The answer is also reasonable once one is initiated into some of the history and culture of medieval Iceland, and so this introduction aims to provide a brief initiation. First, it is important to know about whom we speak when we talk about the Vikings. While in the popular imagination the label “Viking” has become synonymous with bearded men, horn-pronged helmets, and a fierce disposition, the term itself derives from the Old Norse word vik, which refers to the “small creeks” or “inlets” that dot the coasts in Scandinavian geography (An Icelandic-English Dictionary 716). Thus, Vikings were named for the practice of roaming from inlet to inlet in ships with the intention of pillaging whatever could be found so as to accrue honor and wealth before settling down to a more domestic lifestyle (716). Therefore, to think of “Viking” as a fixed identity is inaccurate. Put another way, “Viking” is not something you are, it is something you do. It was the medieval Icelandic version of a “gap year.” The literature of the Vikings, then, refers not only to stories of conquest and violence but to the day-to-day conflicts and ambitions of Iceland’s inhabitants after the “viking” was over.

Among these narratives is a pivotal moment in Iceland’s history: its conversion to Christianity at the turn of the millennium. The shift this moment brought to the island is the focal point of the articles included in this issue. Thus, these primary sources are themselves concerned with faith and learning, as they demonstrate how religions were practiced and propagated. Before their conversion to Christianity, medieval Icelanders would have adhered to Scandinavian paganism. The tenth-century English abbot, Ælfric of Eynsham, rails against the deities of this heathen faith in his homily “On the False Gods” (De Falsis Diis). In this text, Ælfric names various deities—Odin, Thor, and Frigg, among others—and argues that they are the counterparts of Roman gods and goddesses, all of whom are revered despite the shameful stories attributed to them (681-6). The practices common to this faith are discussed in some detail in texts such as Tacitus’s Germania as well as the Ibn Fadlan’s Journey to Russia.1 While the precise motivation for Tacitus’s ethnographic work on the Germanic people is unclear, he presents them as a noble people who may pose a threat to Rome (Bernario 3). While these interests may have colored his presentation, Tacitus offers glimpses into their pagan faith when he discusses their chief gods and how the Germanic people worship them (Tacitus 23). Both Tacitus and Ibn Fadlan relate the practice of offering human sacrifices and the consecration of “groves and glades” to their gods (Tacitus 23; Frye 66-71). The Ibn Fadlan account relates one particularly disturbing tale of the ritual killing of a
slave girl on the occasion of a chieftain’s death, a scene that will be discussed in more depth in Eric Shane Bryan’s essay below. This pagan faith was prominent even as Iceland was first settled in the ninth century. Both Landnámabók (Book of Settlements) and Eyrbyggja saga (The Saga of the People of Eyri) relate that the first settlers relied upon the gods to guide them to the place on the island where they should build their farmsteads. As their boats approached the island, they would throw overboard the high-seat pillars, ornamental posts that decorated the sides of the seats of honor in a Scandinavian hall, often shaped to resemble gods such as Thor—and seek the place where they drifted ashore (An Icelandic-English Dictionary 765). That these pillars were among the things the early Icelandic settlers brought from home reveals the reverence with which they were treated, and their willingness to settle wherever these pillars reached land shows their dependence upon the gods for guidance and prosperity. It is worth noting here that a good deal of our understanding concerning Scandinavian paganism passes to us from texts produced after Iceland accepts Christianity. Thus, scholars note that characterizations of the pagan past may well be Christian constructs (Orri Vésteinsson 7). Consequently, it is important to bear in mind that accounts of Iceland’s pre-Christian past are complicated by their Christian present.

A long campaign of persuasion, argument, and force eventually brought about a break with these old gods in favor of the new faith. Iceland’s relationship with Christianity extends farther back than the conversion in 1000. The Book of Icelanders (Íslendingabók) notes that Christians had been on the island from the time of the first settlers. Ari Porgilsson explains that Irish missionaries spent time on the island and ultimately left “because they did not wish to stay here with heathens” (4; ch. 1). These Irish Christians were not missionaries but monks, who were likely itinerant Christians who had forsaken their homeland in devotion to Christ (17; n. 18). The stories that tell of Iceland’s later acceptance of Christianity reveal much about the way the medieval Icelanders experienced religion, and the nuances of these accounts are still the subject of scholarly debate today. The most notable primary texts for the conversion are Theodoricus monachus’s Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium (The Ancient History of the Norwegian Kings), Historia Norveigiae Ágrip, Oddr Snorrason’s Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar (Olaf Tryggvason’s Saga), Snorri Sturluson’s Heimskringla, Brennu-Njáls saga (Njal’s Saga), Kristni saga (The Story of the Conversion), and Olaf’s saga Tryggvasonar en mesta (Greatest Saga of Olaf Tryggvason) (Faulkes 118; n. 32). Perhaps the most detailed of these accounts is the one given in The Story of the Conversion, and the following brief synopsis of how Christianity came to Iceland is adapted from this source.

A man named Þorvaldr Koðránsson encounters a bishop named Friðrekr in the south of Norway while on a raiding voyage and receives baptism from him. Þorvaldr petitions Friðrekr to go to Iceland to baptize his father, and the two men arrive there in the summer of 981. The men are reported to have traveled across the Northern Quarter of Iceland preaching to the inhabitants there, a duty that fell to Þorvaldr because Friðrekr did not speak the language. When Þorvaldr presents his father with the tenets of the new faith, he is reluctant to embrace it. Hedirects the two missionaries to a large stone in which he believes his guardian spirit
resides, saying that he cannot accept the new faith until he knows whether Friðrekr is more powerful than the spirit in the stone. Friðrekr sings over the stone, and as he does so the stone splits in two. This demonstration is sign enough for Þorvaldr’s father, and his household is baptized at once.

The men continue to act as missionaries with varying degrees of success. They enjoy one notable victory at an Autumn feast during which Friðrekr displays the power of the new faith. Two berserkers, men believed to become so crazed in battle that they cannot be harmed, approach and behave erratically, howling like wild beasts, walking through the fire, and threatening violence against the other party-goers. The people turn to Friðrekr and ask him to dispatch these two men. He consecrates the fire through which the berserkers are so arrogantly walking, and the next time they attempt to step through it their frenzied invincibility falters. They sustain serious burns, and this result emboldens the people to attack the berserkers and kill them. As this story shows, adherence to Christianity does not necessarily preclude violence and killing in medieval Iceland. Indeed, David Clark shows that the early Icelandic church interpreted Biblical accounts of revenge as precedent for such violence, and these allowances were then codified in the Icelandic laws (119-30).

Subsequent missionary ventures for Friðrekr and Þorvaldr are less successful, and Þorvaldr’s impulse toward revenge drives a wedge between the two men. When opponents to the new faith induce poets to compose libelous verses insinuating that Þorvaldr and Friðrekr have borne children together, Þorvaldr, enraged, murders them for the offense. Consequently, the heathen men on the island label them as outlaws, which means they must leave the country or expose themselves to violence and death without any of the protections granted by Icelandic law. Eventually, the people assemble a mob to burn their home to the ground with Þorvaldr and Friðrekr inside. According to The Story of the Conversion, the mob is deterred by a flock of birds that cause their horses to rear up and injure their riders so severely that the men must turn back. Despite this apparent divine intervention, the first missionary journey ends in failure, as Þorvaldr and Friðrekr leave the island and are divided by Þorvaldr’s violent desire for vengeance, which causes him, even as they are abroad, to exact vengeance on a heathen Icelander whose path happens to cross his own.

After Þorvaldr and Friðrekr’s ill-fated conversion attempt, the next character to enter the story is Pangbrandr, who according to The Story of the Conversion, was a chaplain in Jutland. Because Pangbrandr has “the manners of a knight,” his brother, Bishop Albert, gives him a shield bearing an image of the cross and a crucified Christ (The Story of the Conversion 39). Pangbrandr converts King Óláfr Tryggvasson and finds favor with him. He will soon need to avail himself of the king’s favor. Pangbrandr has something of a checkered history and must flee Denmark after killing a man who attempts to take a beautiful Irish girl that Pangbrandr has bought. Pangbrandr seeks safety with King Óláfr, who welcomes him and ordains him as a priest. At this point in the narrative, Pangbrandr encounters more difficulty. The saga tells us that Pangbrandr was “a very extravagant man and open-handed, and his money soon ran out” (39). To bolster his wealth, Pangbrandr takes to raiding. This decision
no doubt will seem strange to modern readers. How can a priest reconcile a raiding voyage with his faith? Indeed, the shield bearing the image of the crucified Christ underscores the combination of piety and martial force that characterize his approach to his missionary efforts and his personal conduct.

Just as Fróðrek rejects Þórvaldr’s violent behaviour, King Óláfr is displeased when he hears of Þangbrandr’s raids. When the king learns of “the unruly things Þangbrandr was doing, he summoned him to him and laid charges against him and said that he should not be in his service, when he is a robber” (40). To make reconciliation for his transgressions, Þangbrandr agrees to journey to Iceland as a missionary. King Óláfr himself had just fled the island after trying to convert the people there and meeting with fierce opposition. Naturally, the Icelanders do not take kindly to King Óláfr’s strategies, which include “destroy[ing] temples and places of worship to break up idols” (40). When Þangbrandr arrives in Iceland the next summer, he faces a cold reception. Slowly, however, Þangbrandr begins to develop a small contingent of people amenable to Christianity, mainly through showing the power and efficacy of the faith.

During the first missionary effort in Iceland, those who resist the new faith take strength from the apparent power of their gods to drive away the invading Christians. When Þórvaldr and Fróðrek are successfully slandered by the poets, this emboldens the heathen resistance. Similarly, when they are put to flight by the crowd of men and leave the island, the Icelanders understand this as a victory for the pagan gods over the Christian God. This sense of power is evident from an exchange Þangbrandr has with Steinunn, a poetess. Here, Steinunn matches Þangbrandr in his missionary zeal, except, in her case, she attempts to persuade him of the supremacy of Thor (Þórr):²

> “Have you heard,” she said, “that Thor challenged Christ to a duel and that Christ didn’t dare to fight with him?”
> “What I have heard,” said Thangbrand, “is that Thor would be mere dust and ashes if God didn’t want him to live.”
> “Do you know,” she said “who wrecked your ship?”
> “What can you say about it?” he said. (Njal’s Saga 177)²

Steinunn then utters two skaldic verses suggesting that Thor was responsible for Þangbrandr’s nautical misfortune. While we are told that “Thangbrand was silent while she spoke, but then spoke at length and showed everything she said to be wrong,” Njal’s Saga presents none of this speech (177). The implication, at least for Steinunn, appears to be that Þangbrandr’s shipwreck is evidence in itself against the power of his deity.

As Þangbrandr continues in his efforts, he seems most effective when he appeals to the great power allegiance to the Christian God confers. In one encounter with Síðu-Hallr, a man who would later become a significant proponent of Christianity on the island, Þangbrandr discusses the Archangel Michael. Impressed, Síðu-Hallr replies, “The one whom these angels serve must be powerful indeed” (The Story of the Conversion 41). The account of this conversation in Njal’s Saga includes an additional detail. Síðu-Hallr agrees to
convert if Þangbrandr promises that Michael will be his guardian angel (*Njal’s Saga* 174). Might impressed the medieval Icelanders, and access to power is treated as reasonable grounds for religious conversion. Alongside this somewhat cynical view of early Icelandic piety, it is also possible to understand Síðu-Hallr’s request in a more charitable light. Andrew Hamer, for instance, argues that this request “reveals the earnestness of [Síðu-Hallr’s] desire to become a Christian, and the grace of God in allowing him the vision necessary to contemplate such a friendship” (107). With the Christian contingent slowly growing as more influential Icelanders are won over to the new faith, something of a national crisis emerges. The heathens and the Christians begin to view their respective laws as incompatible, and the future of the commonwealth is threatened by this conflict.

*The Story of the Conversion* reaches its climax at the Icelandic parliament in the summer of 1000. After Þangbrandr leaves Iceland, two men take up the cause of conversion: Gizurr the White (*hvíti*) and his son-in-law Hjalti Skeggjason. With the help of King Óláfr, the men mount yet another effort to bring Christianity to the island. The heathens try to prevent Gizurr and Hjalti from attending the assembly but fail to do so. Once Gizurr and Hjalti begin to speak, the saga reports that the “people were amazed by how eloquent they were and how well they spoke, and such great fear came with their words that none of their enemies dared speak against them” (48). Rather than accept leadership of the Christian contingent and cement the division between opposing sides, Síðu-Hallr reaches an agreement with the heathen law-speaker, Þorgeirr, to recite both the heathen and the Christian laws. What follows is one of the most enigmatic moments of the conversion narrative. Þorgeirr lies down, spreads a cloak over himself, “and lay like that all day and all night, until the same time the next day” (49). The cloak has been interpreted as a kind of chrysalis within which Þorgeirr prepares for spiritual metamorphosis as well as a ritual during which he tries to divine the future and seek supernatural guidance (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 142). When Þorgeirr emerges, he assembles the people and declares that all of Iceland will accept the Christian faith. Þorgeirr reveals in his speech that a desire to maintain unity and preserve the rule of law motivates his decision. “That summer,” the saga informs us, “Christianity was made law in Iceland, one thousand years had passed from the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ” (50).

The effect of this religious shift was extreme, and scholars continue to debate the extent and nature of Iceland’s resulting transformation. Among the many consequences of the conversation was that Old Norse developed into a written language (Meulengracht Sørenson 8). The Icelandic family sagas are themselves written, vernacular accounts of events and people that range from Iceland’s pagan past to its Christian present. In some places, these authors betray hints of their personal feelings regarding the behavior of saga characters who, while revered, sometimes pose problems for Christian codes of conduct. In *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers* (*Fóstbrœðra saga*), the author makes the following observation after relating that Þorgeirr and Þormóðr swear pledges to avenge one another should either of them be killed: “For though people called themselves Christians, their Christianity was still young and weak, so that many traces of heathendom remained and entered into their customs. Thus it had been the
practice of illustrious men who made covenant between them that he who survived should avenge the other” (*The Saga of the Sworn Brothers* 85-86). Many of the texts discussed in this issue will have a similar degree of self-consciousness about the behavior of the characters they describe. This self-consciousness shows a discomfort with the cultural practices of Iceland even after Christianity had infused the culture.

The laws of the commonwealth were also committed to writing and the Christian laws were codified alongside Iceland’s societal laws. Þorgeirr’s pronouncement that “all people in Iceland should be baptized and believe in one God” can seem on its face a nominal acceptance of the new faith, especially when one considers that the old, heathen practices were allowed to continue if they were kept out of the public eye (*The Story of the Conversion* 50). But the laws themselves may offer clues that show the acceptance of the new faith ran deeper than formal, public declarations. Among these are laws that obligate Icelandic citizens to give what aid they can to families who must travel to have their newborn children baptized (*Laws of Early Iceland* 23). Those who refused to provide shelter or draught animals for travel are subject to legal action. A priest who refused to baptize a child may be outlawed (23). If a family cannot reach a priest for baptism, a layperson is required to perform the rite. Those presiding over baptism were required to recite certain words, which suggests that the language of baptism may have been familiar enough to the layperson so as to reasonably expect faithful observance of the act (24-25). These expectations suggest that learning was a central aspect of the new faith, even as parts of the old faith are retained through similar transmissions of knowledge.

The articles included here examine texts that engage with many of the issues raised by Iceland’s religious history and its attempts to transmit religious knowledge. They divide into two sections: critical studies and pedagogical essays. The first of the critical studies, Eric Shane Bryan’s “The Moon Glides, Death Rides: Pejoration and Aborted Otherworldly Journeys in ‘The Dead Bridegroom Carries off his Bride’ (ATU 365),” examines a nineteenth-century Icelandic folktale in which a young Deacon engaged to be married suffers an untimely death. Strangely, the Deacon rises again, not to take his place among the angelic hosts, but to find his fiancé and to drag her with him into the grave. Working with Eddic poetry and ethnographic evidence, Bryan follows the development of this folktale from its pagan origins to its later, post-conversion form. As a result, Bryan argues that Christian influence lent this formerly laudatory class of tales a sinister character. Bryan’s analysis shows the peculiar cast Icelandic folk belief sometimes gives to orthodox theology.

Similarly, Kent Pettit’s article, “Christmas Eve of the Living Dead: The Satanic *Draugr*,” examines the strained relationship between pre- and post-Christian Iceland as it is told in the Old Norse family sagas *Grettir’s Saga* (*Grettis saga*) and *The Saga of the People of Eyri*. In his study, Pettit considers the supernatural accounts of the Old Norse draugr, a reanimated corpse that returns to wreak havoc on the living. Pettit focuses on the harm these draugar aim to bring to the newly converted Icelandic Christians. He interprets these apparitions as a sign of the old faith striving against the new, even after the matter of formal
conversion had been settled legally at the Althing. Pettit pays particular attention to the manner in which these walking undead can be vanquished as well as the characters who succeed in destroying them. Pettit argues that these draugar represent perversions of Christ’s bodily resurrection, and, using English texts that present similar hauntings, he suggests that these tales convey Christ’s power to save people not only from their sins, but also from the enduring horrors of paganism.

My article, “The Problem of Emotion: Legal Codes and the Medieval Icelandic Outlaw” shifts the discussion from spiritual outcasts to social outcasts. The laws of early Iceland are woven through many facets of daily life, even in stories of the walking undead, and here I consider the limitations of the law to address the emotional needs of the offended. Focusing on Njal’s Saga, I examine the specific case of the medieval Icelandic outlaw and the characteristics that make individuals more likely to be burdened with this label. I argue that saga characters who are induced to act on their emotions often transgress the law because of the pragmatism encoded within Icelandic social expectations. In view of these realities, I argue that Christianity brings with it new possibilities for reconciling one’s emotional needs with the pragmatism medieval Icelandic society prizes.

The following two pedagogical essays consider ways to incorporate the literature of the Vikings into English courses at the college and university level. Michael David Elam’s essay, “Christian Axioms and Cultural Moral Practice: Strengthening Faith in Studying Njáls saga,” proposes strategies for teaching Old Norse literature at Christian schools. Elam recognizes the difficulty these texts sometimes present for modern readers who approach them with strong moral convictions. Elam encourages us to use these challenges to broaden students’ literary sensibilities so that they learn to attend charitably to different cultural and social conventions. Elam argues that to engage thoughtfully with such cultures is not to embrace their practices, and, indeed, students may find that such contact strengthens their faith as well as their ability to render thoughtful cultural critiques.

Jonathan B. Himes’s pedagogical essay “Viking Literature and Christianity: A Place-as-Text Approach,” suggests that charitable and productive engagements with Old Norse literature extend beyond one’s judgments. An openness to texts, Himes suggests, can also be cultivated by treating literary settings as texts themselves. Himes relates his experience teaching “Myths & Epics of Northwestern Europe” as a travel study course and describes how learning in the environments in which these texts were composed or are believed to have taken place makes literature more accessible for students. Students who study the literature of the Viking must overcome a high degree of alterity to feel comfortable with these texts. Himes argues that a place-as-text approach aids students in this task. He also demonstrates how professors may adapt the place-as-text method to texts that may be native to their own geographical locations.

As one might expect, such deeply ingrained religious beliefs and practices do not vanish overnight. After Iceland accepted Christianity, the paganism of many of the island’s inhabitants persisted in various forms. The essays included
here, much like the texts they examine, straddle the period of the Icelandic conversion. They simultaneously look back toward the pagan past and look forward to a commonwealth entering an uncertain future. In both the past and the future, medieval Icelanders were strongly influenced by their faith and their literature, and the strength of these influences makes for fascinating elisions between the pagan and the Christian. It is tempting to draw fixed boundaries between these two influences, but the truth is rarely so tidy. At many points and in many ways, the literature of the Vikings presents readers with astonishing moments of hybridity and assimilation. These moments offer startling glimpses into a culture working to bring together its past and future in sometimes challenging ways. It is my hope that readers of Intégrité will see this special issue as an opportunity to consider how the literature of the medieval Icelanders engages with themes of faith and learning. I urge reader to reflect upon the ways medieval Icelanders had to adapt themselves to the changes time wrought in their national identity. It will also be of interest for Intégrité readers to see that while Christianity brings with it opportunities for different engagements with the world and one’s neighbor, in practice it may not always succeed in addressing those aspects of humanity it aims to redeem. In considering the resilience of evil—either in the walking undead of the Icelandic draugr or the cycle of violence perpetuated by incessant feuding—we may find ways to stand against our own personal and cultural frailties as we strive toward peace and reconciliation.

Notes

1 For more on this text and why its reliability is questionable, see Eric Shane Bryan’s essay below (17).

2 Siân Grønlie calls Steinunn “the pagan equivalent of a missionary” in her essay “No Longer Male and Female: Redeeming Women in the Icelandic Conversion Narratives.” Here she discusses the role of gender in the Icelandic conversion and the tendency of Icelandic women to resist Christianity and cling to the old faith.

3 The Story of the Conversion states that Síðu-Hallr and Þorgeirr reach this agreement “for sixty ounces of silver” (49). While scholars have traditionally understood this transfer of money as a “lawfull fee” (Robertson 489), the nature of both the agreement and decision Þorgeirr ultimately renders is clouded by suspicion of bribery.

Works Cited


The Moon Glides, Death Rides: Pejoration and Aborted Otherworldly Journeys in “The Dead Bridegroom Carries off his Bride” (ATU 365)¹

Eric Shane Bryan

Abstract

The nineteenth-century Icelandic folktale “The Deacon of Myrká” is not a love story, but neither is it right to call it a ghost story. It is a tragic, irreverent, and mysterious blend of the two. In it, a beautiful girl is courted by a well-respected young man—a deacon at the local church, in fact. They seem happy, in love, and destined for a good life together, until the young man dies in a tragic accident on his way home from visiting his beloved. Inexplicably, this young man, who was so well liked in life, will not rest easy in his grave. He returns from the dead to terrorize the one person he loved most in life: the beautiful girl whom he had once hoped to marry. One question cannot be ignored: why would such a good man in life become such a monster after death?

This essay seeks to answer this question by recognizing “The Deacon of Myrká” as one of many versions of the tale throughout Europe, and as a story that has its origins in the pre-Christian past. This essay argues that, in its earliest, pre-Christian manifestations, the story was seen as one of romance and honor, whereas later versions of the story were transformed to depict the narrative events as horrific. The reasons why and how this change occurred can tell us a great deal about the relationship between Church theology and (sometimes heterodox) folk beliefs.

The Icelandic folktale called “Djákinn á Myrká” (The Deacon of Myrká; JÁ 1:270-72)² tells the story of a church deacon from the farm at Myrká (Dark Water) in the north of Iceland and his girlfriend, Guðrún, who lived at the nearby farm, Bægisá, which is just across the Hörgá river from Myrká. In the tale, the Deacon goes to visit Guðrún a little before Christmas to ask her whether she would like to go with him to the Christmas Eve party at Myrká. She happily agrees, and the Deacon returns to Myrká after promising to come back on Christmas Eve to escort Guðrún to the party. As he rides back to Myrká that night, however, the ice on the Hörgá river has begun to break up due to an unexpected thaw, so when he tries to cross the river, the ice breaks and the Deacon falls from his horse and suffers a gruesome and fatal wound on the back of his head. The next morning a neighboring farmer finds the Deacon’s horse but not the Deacon, so he goes out to search for him, fearing the worst. He finds the Deacon’s body near the river, and shortly thereafter the Deacon is buried in the
Myrká churchyard. Because of the weather conditions, however, no one is able to get word of the tragedy to Guðrún across the river. On Christmas Eve, therefore, Guðrún is not surprised when the Deacon arrives at Bægisá as planned to escort her to the party. The Deacon is a little quiet, a little pale, and strangely cold, but she mounts the horse behind him and they begin the trip to Myrká. As they cross the Hörgá river, the Deacon’s hat slips forward just enough to reveal the nasty, clearly fatal wound on the back of his head. At this point, the Deacon recites an ancient poem:

Máninn líður,
dauðinn ríður;
sérðu ekki hvítan blett
í hnakka mínum,
Garún, Garún?

The moon glides,
death rides;
don’t you see the white gash
in my neck,
Garún, Garún?

Guðrún is frightened but stays on the horse behind the Deacon until they arrive at Myrká. She then realizes that the Deacon is taking her to the churchyard, where his open grave awaits them both. At this, Guðrún’s fear gets the best of her, and she begins to fight to get away. Looking desperately for any way free, Guðrún scrambles and grabs at whatever is close at hand, and as they cross the threshold of the graveyard, she manages to get hold of the bell cord at the gate leading into the churchyard and rings the bell for dear life. The sound of the bell is enough to send the Deacon into a frenzy, and Guðrún manages to escape with her life. In his frenzy the Deacon is able to clutch only her riding cloak, and with that he goes down into his grave as the dirt pours in atop him.

Thus begins the story of “The Deacon of Myrká,” one of the most popular nineteenth-century Icelandic folktales. It is a classic example of the international tale type known as “The Dead Bridegroom Carries off his Bride” (ATU 365), which tells the story of a recently deceased Bridegroom who returns from the dead to drag his unwitting Bride into the grave with him. This tale type has enjoyed a remarkably broad appeal to storytellers throughout Europe. Hans-Jörg Uther identifies examples of the tale type in no less that forty-five distinct cultures, with all but one of those cultures (Japanese) having their origins in either (in forty instances) the European or (in four instances) the Finno-Ugarit world (Uther, “Dead Bridegroom” ATU 365). In this essay, I will examine the cultural and religious influences on ATU 365 in Iceland, first by briefly considering the hypothesis, which has been made before, that ATU 365 has connections to medieval accounts of ritualistic death and burial practices prevalent in Old Norse literature and other semi-historical medieval sources. I will then suggest that the folkloristic development of ATU 365 in Iceland suffered from what might be
called a process of pejoration, a term I borrow from historical linguistics, that occurred as the religious landscape in Iceland changed during the medieval and post-medieval periods. As in the study of linguistics, pejoration here means that a tale type (in this case ATU 365) was once perceived by storytellers and audiences as a positive or even admirable tale, but at a later date, the tale came to be perceived as something vulgar or evil. This pejoration process, I go on to argue, left conspicuously unanswered questions about the logic and belief system apparent in the tale. As a result, I suggest that a corresponding group of tales arose in Iceland that seem to respond to the deficiencies of the pejorated ATU 365, thus creating what I term an “adjacency pair,” or two tales, groups of tales, or variants that have developed together to create a more complete system of belief around the tales.

ATU 365 and Connections to Old Norse Literature

Francis Child was the first to recognize a connection between ATU 365 and Old Norse narrative. In his late nineteenth century collection, English and Scottish Popular Ballads, Child says of the eighteenth-century ballad “Sweet William’s Ghost,” that the ballad “agrees in many particulars with the conclusion of the second lay of Helgi Hundingsbani in the Elder Edda” (77). Since Child’s comments, numerous passing references to a connection between Old Norse sources and ATU 365 may be found throughout scholarly discussions, yet I have not discovered any in-depth examination of those possible connections. To do so would require a more involved study than is possible here, but I hope at least to set a foundation for future work.

Three relevant medieval connections to ATU 365 are worth mentioning here. First, the Eddic poem “Helgakviða Hundingsbana Önnur” (The Second Lay of Helgi Hunding’s Bane) presents the final chapter of two heroic lovers—the great king Helgi and his Valkyrie wife, Sigrún—whose love had endured great adversity only for Helgi to be killed at the hands of Sigrún’s brother, Dagr. A burial mound is raised for Helgi, and Helgi is said to go on to Óðinn’s hall to join the einherjar (a prestigious group of warriors who will fight for Óðinn at the end of the world). Sigrún’s grief and tears are so great, however, that she calls him back to the living for one last night with his Bride. The relevant passage is as follows:

“Helgakviða Hundingsbana Önnur” (The Second Lay of Helgi Hunding’s Bane)

Heim gecc ambót oc sagði Sigrúno:
“Ut gaec þú, Sigrún frá Sefafíollom,
ef þic fócles iðafar finna lystir;
up er haugr lokinn, kominn er Helgi;
dólgspor dreyra, döglingr bað þic,
at þú sárdropas svefia scyldir.” . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

The maid went home and told Sigrun: “Go outside, Sigrun, out from Sefafell, if you want to meet the leader of the army; the mound has opened up, Helgi has come;
“Fyrr vil ec kyssa konung ólifðan,
Enn þú blóðugri brynio kastir;
Hár er þitt, Helgi, hÉlo þrungit,
Allr er vísi valdögg sleginn,
Hendr úrsvalar Högna mági;
Hvé scal ec þér, buðlungr, þess bótk of
vinna?

Sigrún bió sæing í hauginom.
“Hér hefi ec þér, Helgi, hvílo gorva,
angrlau sa mioc, Ylfinga niðr;
vil ec þér í faðmi, fylkir, sofna,
sem ec loftungi lífnom myndac.”
(Kuhn, Edda Stz. 42, 44, and 47)

The relevant elements are that (1) a well-respected man, Helgi, has died and he bids his beloved, Sigrún, to enter his burial mound with him to tend his bloody wounds; (2) Sigrún, grieving, willingly and eagerly does so and ornately prepares a bed for them both to lie upon; and, most importantly, (3) in the morning, Helgi returns to Valhalla and does not come back. Sigrún dies of grief not long after.

Closely related to the death scene in “Helgakviða Hundingsbana Önnur” is another Eddic poem, “Sigurðarkviða in Skamma” (“The Shorter lay of Sigurðr”), which is concerned with possibly the most famous story in all of Germanic and Old Norse literature: that of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and the Valkyrie, Brynhildr:

“Sigurðarkviða inn Skamma”

Biðia mun ec þíc bœnar einnar,
Sú mun í heimi hínzt bœn vera:
Láttu svá breidá borg á velli,
At undir oss öllum íafnúmt sé,
Þeim er sulto með Sigurði.

Tialdi þar um þá borgtioldom oc scioldom
Valarift vel fáð oc Vala mengi;
Brenni mér inn húnscá á hlið ædra.

(“The Short Lay of Sigurd” trans. Larrington)

“I must ask you for one thing only, this will be my last request in this world: let a pyre be built on the meadow with enough space for all of us, those who died with Sigurd.

“Cover the pyre with shields and hangings, skillfully patterned foreign weavings, and many foreign slaves; burn the southern man beside me.
This poem describes Brynhildr’s lamentations after the great hero, Sigurðr, meets his unfortunate demise (even though Brynhildr is the one who arranges his murder). This burial scene again features (1) the death of a well-respected man, (2) the grieving bride who goes to her lover and prepares a marriage bed/pyre upon which the lovers lie, (3) which will facilitate the journey into the afterlife. To point (3), Brynhildr proclaims, “Shut not yet on Sigurðr’s heels / the gleaming, ring-locked gates of Hel” (Stz. 69), implying that Sigurðr cannot, or must not, make the otherworldly journey into the afterlife without his bride.

A third medieval reference is more controversial. It has become unpopular to associate these two death and burial scenes from the Poetic Edda with the well-known tenth-century account of a Rus, possibly Viking ship burial described by the Arabic traveler Ibn Fadlan, mainly, I suppose, because it remains uncertain that Ibn Fadlan was indeed describing a tribe of Scandinavian voyagers who had come so far into Russia (Montgomery 1-5). If the rituals described are not Scandinavian, then it is difficult to see how they would be connected to burials described in Scandinavian Eddic poetry.

Regardless of these reservations, the similarities between the Eddic death scenes and the burial ritual described by Ibn Fadlan are, frankly, quite strong:

Then they produced a couch and placed it on the ship, covering it with quilts <made of> Byzantine silk brocade and cushions <made of> Byzantine silk brocade. Then a crone arrived whom is called the “Angel of Death” and she spread on the couch the coverings we have mentioned. She is responsible for having his garments sewn up and putting them in order and it is she who kills the slave-girls. (Montgomery 15)

And later,

Six men entered the pavilion and all had intercourse with the slave-girl. They laid her down beside her master and two of them took hold of her feet, two her hands. The crone called “The Angel of Death” placed a rope around her neck in such as way that the ends crossed one another and handed it to two <of the men> to pull on it. She advanced with a broad-bladed dagger and began to thrust it in and out between her ribs, now here, now there, while the two men throttled her with the rope until she died. (Montgomery 19)

Here we may observe that, despite the brutality of the death ritual, the essential aspects of the ritual remain: (1) a well-respected man, probably a high ranking chieftain, has died; (2) a marriage bed/pyre is ornately prepared for the deceased and a lover; and (3) for the express purpose of facilitating the chieftain’s passage
into the afterlife, the death ritual hinges upon a sexual union—however gruesome—enacted by the chieftain’s men on behalf of the chieftain.

Setting these medieval sources alongside the post-medieval narratives allows for a comparison of common elements: in both medieval and post-medieval sources, (1) a man of good reputation—a deacon, chieftain, or hero—has died; (2) he is unable to complete his otherworld journey to the afterlife; consequently, (3) certain burial proceedings are enacted that include the participation of a beloved or bride. In the medieval sources, these include the preparation of a marriage bed/pyre and the accompaniment of a wife, lover, or slave; and in the post-medieval accounts, they include the abduction of the grieving Bride. The essential difference between the medieval and post-medieval narratives is that in almost all cases, the post-medieval tales like “The Deacon of Myrká,” the Bride is either terrified of the recently deceased Bridegroom and tries to get away or she wants to go with him but is forbidden. In most cases she survives the encounter.

The Pejoration of ATU 365

One of the important nuances of ATU 365 is that it has never been only about the loss of a lover. These stories are about the loss of a lover and the otherworldly journey the deceased lover takes into the afterlife. If, however, there is any value in the connections between medieval sources and post-medieval tales, then the differences between the early and late traditions indicate a kind of pejoration process in the development of ATU 365. The emphasis and cultural investment in the two components of ATU 365—the loss of a lover and the journey to the afterlife—changed as time passed, so that a developmental trajectory may be observed. In the sources discussed here, the Ibn Fadlan account offers some indication of what the early, pre-Christian stages of this development might have looked like in the developmental trajectory of these narratives. That account describes a ritual that is almost wholly concerned with the journey to the afterlife, as indicated by a conversation recounted in the Ibn Fadlan narrative: when the Arabic traveler asks one of the Rus why they burn their dead, the latter replies, “we burn them in the fire there and then, so that they enter Paradise immediately. . . . Because of the love which my Lord feels for [the dead]. [The Lord] has sent the wind to take [the dead] away within an hour” (Montgomery 20). Of course, what the Rus leaves out is that the dead chieftain is not burned alone but with the female slave who is meant to be his lover. But while there is an element of an intimate connection between the female slave to be sacrificed and the chieftain to whom she is bound in death, that element has more to do with the ritual journey the deceased must take than with any sense of romantic commitment on the part of the chieftain or the unfortunate girl. It is clear that the slave is meant to see her sacrifice as a great honor—she volunteers—but it is not because of any apparent love she feels for the deceased. She and the rest of the female slaves have been convinced that to die with the chieftain is a high honor. In fact, a particularly chilling moment in the Ibn Fadlan account occurs when the
men outside the ritual ship are instructed to bang their shields and make other noise to cover the screams of the slave-girl as she is murdered, lest the other young women in attendance become reluctant to participate in future such rituals (Montgomery 19).

“Helgakviða Hundingsbana Ónnur” and “Sigurðarkviða in Skamma” represent a midway point along the narrative’s trajectory, where the grossly sexualized ritual of the Ibn Fadlan account is transformed into a desperate, romantic commitment on the part of both the Bride and the Bridegroom. The romantic element thus rationalizes the sacrifice to be made. It is possible that earlier, oral versions of these narratives were coeval with rituals such as that observed by Ibn Fadlan, and in fact were used as a kind of script for the ritual. While we have no direct evidence of such a thing, Terry Gunnell’s work on the origins of drama in Scandinavia may lend some credence to the speculation. Gunnell is able to argue that poems in the Poetic Edda were once used to support dramatic, possibly ritual enactments of the narratives. If so, then an oral tradition would, even in the earliest stages, be responsible for romanticizing the ritual sacrifice. Regardless, at least by this time of the Poetic Edda, the functionality of these death and burial motifs has shifted: whereas the ritual practices in the Ibn Fadlan account were invested in the wellbeing of the deceased and in his journey to the afterlife, the heroic narratives in the Poetic Edda invest themselves not only in that journey but also in the grieving beloved who is left behind.

By the time of the post-medieval narrative, the developmental trajectory has severed all ties with any sympathy we may have for the deceased’s otherworldly journey. As Ronald M. James observes in reference to Cornish variants of the tale type, “for pre-Christian society, crossing the line into the supernatural—or at least in this case into the realm of the dead—for romance was heroic. Nineteenth-century expressions of the story generally assert that no living person would want to enter the grave, even when it is the last resting place of a lover” (James 143). The same may be said of nineteenth-century versions of the tale in Iceland and, generally, in other cultures where the tale is found. Even in those variants in which sympathy with the deceased might remain, the thought of going with the deceased has become pejorated. Acknowledging this pejoration process, however, points to a problem with the development of ATU 365. As the function of the Bride’s joining her fallen Bridegroom in the grave becomes pejorated, the Bridegroom’s safe conduct during his otherworldly journey to the afterlife is hindered. To put it another way, if the Bride does not go with her Bridegroom into the grave, then the Bridegroom cannot rest peacefully after death. “The Deacon of Myrká” illustrates the problem quite well, for after Guðrún is saved from her fate that night, the Deacon goes on to terrorize Guðrún and the farm at Myrká for two more weeks. Only when the townspeople enlist the help of a galdramaður, a magician, is the Deacon finally laid to rest, and then only after a great struggle in which a large boulder is set upon his grave.

The pejoration of ATU 365 also leaves a conspicuously unanswered question: Why does a man who was good and moral in life—a Christian deacon, in fact—become so evil a creature in death that he walks the earth doing harm to the ones he formerly loved?
A Theological and Historical Context

A brief examination of the religious and theological developments in Iceland might offer some explanation to this quandary, at least as it stands in Iceland. It may appear logical that after the conversion and Christianization that took place in Iceland during the medieval period, the new Christian worldview would quickly facilitate a pejoration of such sacrifices, but poems such as “Helgakviða Hundingsbana Ónnur” and “Sigurðarkviða in Skamma” attest to at least a lingering appreciation of the romantic aspects of the ritual, as James’s observations have shown. I suggest that it is Lutheran, rather than Catholic, doctrine and culture that brings about the most significant pejoration of ATU 365 in Iceland, and it is particularly a preoccupation with Hell that does so. B.S. Benedikz has argued that post-Reformation Iceland experienced such a preoccupation with Hell due to what amounts to faulty Lutheran theology: “[Icelanders’] minds were fed by ill-trained priests, most of whom were no better off that themselves physically or spiritually, with an ill-digested adulterated Lutheranism which passed for theology in which Hell became of greater importance than Heaven” (2). During the era to which Benedikz refers, the country of Iceland was characterized by a struggle and a despair that lingered through the fifteenth and sixteenth century. Poor food supply and Danish oppression drove Icelanders into what Benedikz calls the “slough of mental and physical degradation” (2). Along with Reformation came a redoubled effort to stamp out any moral turpitude in the country, and the effort prompted a more aggressive and, importantly, a much more corporeal approach to governing morality. In 1564, the Alþingi, the Icelandic parliament, passed the Stóridómur (The Great Verdict), a law put forward in an effort to secularize punishment of immorality, which invoked a real and tangible punishment that had not been immediately present in the Catholicism of Iceland.

Regarding the theology of post-Reformation Iceland, Jack P. Cunningham looks at the broader landscape, both politically and theologically, of Icelandic Reformation to argue that the Reformation in Iceland succeeded due in part to the significant developments in Denmark and in part to the fairly minimal theological changes brought about by Icelandic Reformers. Cunningham argues that these minimal theological changes reflect “a deliberate ploy of the Reformers,” who wanted to make it easy for Icelanders to accept the new theology (“Changing Fashions” 67). Whether Cunningham is right about the motivations behind the theologically soft Reformation in Iceland, it does seem to be the case that, at least initially, there was little changed on the ground level of theology in Iceland, but there were also no remaining Catholic bishops or priests to preserve the old theology. Consequently, and in much the same way that an official-sounding date for conversion does not necessarily signal a society instantaneously Christianized, we must consider whether a “Lutheranization” process following Reformation might have stretched for a considerably long time after Lutheranism won control of Iceland in 1550.7
The first real, ground-level theological changes in Iceland were not enacted for another twenty years. It was the prolific Bishop of Hólar, Guðbrandur Þorláksson (Bishop from 1571 till his death, 20 July 1627), who made the first fruitful efforts to re-educate the Icelandic lay population. Guðbrandur was greatly helped by the introduction of the printing press to Iceland, which allowed the Bishop to write a series of texts that were comparably easy to reproduce. Not least of all, he oversaw a translation of the Bible into Icelandic, Guðbrandsbiblía, which was completed in 1584 and was in use for some considerable time to follow (Karlsson 136). With the publication of his Vísnabók Guðbrands in 1612, Guðbrandur offered a Christian response to what he saw as the rising problem of secular poetry about all manner of unsavory topics, including rímur (long, complicated narrative poems) that were retellings of medieval romances and heroic sagas (Karlsson 137). Guðbrandur was also responsible for overseeing the academic re-education of Iceland.

If we view Guðbrandur’s efforts as the mark of Lutheranization in Iceland, then the process took at least one generation. As important a figure as Guðbrandur was, however, there is some cause to say that the Lutheranization process in Iceland was not fully complete, at least on the ground level, until the life and works of another Icelandic Lutheran bishop, Jón Þorkelsson Vídalín (1666-1720, Bishop of Skálholt from 1697 till his death). The importance of Jón Vídalín’s contribution to the Lutheranization process is not because his theology was materially different from that of his predecessors but rather because his message much more effectively made it into the hands of Icelanders. Jón Vídalín’s Vídalínspostilla—that is, his collected sermons and messages published in 1718 and 1720—were much more likely to be a part of the average Icelander’s daily life than the Bible, which during this time, tended not to be present in every Icelandic household because it was too expensive (Thordarson 59). It was difficult, especially in the winter, for Icelanders to make their way to Sunday church services on a regular basis. Even in the summer months, the long distances between farms made it difficult for Icelanders to attend regular church services. In lieu of regular church attendance, weekly—and in the winter, nightly—times of worship were held, and Vídalínspostilla became arguably the primary text for such “services” from the time of its publication till well into the nineteenth century.

These nightly “services” were, in reality, just one part of a much more important post-Reformation Icelandic tradition. The kvöldvaka, or the “evening wake,” was an occasion during the evenings on farmsteads across Iceland when families gathered together to tell stories, read from the classic medieval sagas, sing songs, recite rímur, and read from religious texts such as Vídalínspostilla. The kvöldvaka was both a form of entertainment and means of worship; it was a key factor in intermingling classic medieval saga materials with the life and culture long after the end of that era. As Emily Lethbridge stated recently, “the kvöldvaka [. . .] meant that orality, or ‘re-oralization’, was still central to the transmission of written texts even up until the nineteenth century in some parts of Iceland” (125-26). As an anthropological phenomenon, the kvöldvaka indicates that there were regular, widespread familial and social gatherings during which
time narrative genres, literary works, and theological perspectives intermingled. As a literary and folkloristic phenomenon, the kvöldvaka thus justifies serious consideration of whether and how religious and secular narratives might display a significant exchange of ideas between each other. Jón’s Vidalinspostilla was a central, vital contributor to the kvöldvaka in both anthropological and literary terms.\textsuperscript{11}

There were, undoubtedly, a wealth of sixteenth and seventeenth century Icelandic oral folk narratives and legends that rankled leaders of the Lutheran church. In fact, Guðbrandur Þorláksson was quite concerned that these heterodox tales might obscure the minds and hearts of Icelanders. Considering the importance of the kvöldvaka, he was probably right to be concerned. He composed his Sálmaböð (Book of Hymns) for the express purpose of competing with the vast numbers of tales, ballads, and songs that he perceived as heterodox. In his introduction to his Sálmaböð, he states his desire that

\[\ldots\text{men might be able to put away unprofitable songs of trolls and of the Heathen of old ("Trölla og Formmanna") \ldots such as are loved and practiced by the common folk ("Alþydu Folke"), to the displeasure of God and his angels, and to the delight and service of the Devil and his messengers, such as is not seen in any other Christian land and more like the manner of Heathen men than Christian . . . (Guðbrandur Þorláksson xvii)}\textsuperscript{12}

These “unprofitable songs” were in many cases later, post-medieval manifestations of medieval narratives from the fornaldarsögur (Legendary Sagas), Íslendingasögur (Icelandic family sagas), and Eddic poetry, which themselves purported to be (whether accurately or not) holdovers from a pre-conversion and Christianization age in Iceland and the medieval North (Driscoll, Bryan 2010 and 2011).

We thus have three cultural-religious phenomena taking place at once: (1) a growing preoccupation with Hell, death, and the afterlife; (2) a changing religious landscape that has not been adequately established to address the fears and needs of a population preoccupied with Hell; and (3) a cultural venue in which theology, folk narratives, and ancient sagas are intermingled. This latter cultural phenomenon, the kvöldvaka, is vitally important because it afforded Icelanders a weekly (or nightly) opportunity to talk, read aloud, and tell stories about those matters of belief that concern them most. Those stories and discussions would have invariably been informed by Lutheran doctrine, but they would just as easily have been merged with the lingering folk belief of the day. This was the cultural-religious environment in which “The Deacon of Myrká” was born in Iceland, having its roots in an ancient and widespread Proto-Indo-European tale type that was sufficiently influenced by a muddled Lutheran message to pejorate the one part of the story that was truly reprehensible in Christian eyes: the willingness of the Bride to be gruesomely murdered for the purpose of securing the Bridegroom’s peaceful transition into the afterlife. The simplest way around this problem in the post-medieval tales is to transform the
recently deceased—who was a “good man” in the ancient pagan ritual and the romantic, heroic narratives of the medieval sources—into an evil, disgruntled creature after his death, who must be defeated rather than comforted in his death.

**Tale Type Adjacency Pairs**

Let us not be mistaken: Christian theology does not object to the sacrifice of one person for the sake of the eternal well being of another. It is not, however, the Bride who is to be sacrificed but rather the Bridegroom (Ephesians 5:21-32). All of Christian theology, both before and after the Reformation, hinges upon this fundamental sacrifice: the brutal death of the Bridegroom, Christ, for the purpose of saving the Bride, the Church. And so might post-Reformation church leaders have hoped to answer the two lingering questions—the problem of a failed transition into the afterlife and that of the deceased, who has transformed into something evil. However, perhaps as a result of the weakened church leadership in Iceland at the time, it is not doctrine but another, closely related group of tales that seems to accommodate this functional void in the Icelandic folk tradition.

This group of folktales depicts visitations from the recently deceased in more of a sentimental than sinister light. In several instances, a recently deceased person appears in a dream or as a ghost in order to tell a loved one something about his or her death. These stories are rather formulaic, typically comprising a brief prose contextualization of events leading to a tragic death, followed by a four- to six-line poem that describes the circumstances of the death and the deceased’s afterlife prospects. The tale “Dapur er Dauðinn Kaldi” (Dreary is Cold Death; JÁ 1:224) serves as a particularly nice example. At around seventy-five words, the story offers a brief description of a man’s death by drowning after having gone out fishing with several others. That night his mistress (unaware of his death) dreams that he comes to her and speaks the following verse:

Mjög var órótt þá að dró nótt.
Dapur er dauðinn kaldi.
Míg þar að bar sem margur var
Á lifandi manna landi. (JÁ 1:224)

All was quite restless as the night dragged on.
Dreary is cold death.
I was taken there where many are,
To the land of the living.

The poem displays a certain morbidity in the first two lines, but in the end it offers consolation and hopefulness to the grieving Bride: *lifandi manna landi* (to the land of the living) must allude to a peaceful afterlife, if not a specific naming of the Christian heaven. The mourner can rest assured that her beloved is in good hands and can hold onto the prospect that she will see him again. Most importantly, the Bridegroom neither tries to deceive the Bride, nor use main force
to take her with him, nor even convince her in any way to come with him. He simply leaves. He needs no assistance or sacrifice to effect his otherworldly journey into the afterlife. His sole purpose in appearing to the bereaved is to ease their pain. In all other respects these tales mirror the formula of ATU 365: A well-respected man has died tragically away from home; the beloved (or loved one) is not aware of his death until he arrives in a dream or as a ghost. Yet after all is said, he leaves to go on their otherworldly journey alone.

A particularly interesting poem in this group refers to a historical personage, a Reverend Þorlákur Þórarinsson, who lived from 1711 to 1773 in Iceland. The tale offers only a single sentence as introduction, saying that the night after the death of Reverend Þorlákur, he visited a girl close to him (though not a lover) and speaks the following verse:

Dauðinn fór djarft að mér,
dauðanum enginn ver;
dauðinn er súr og sæetur,
samt er hann vist ágætur
þeim sem í drottni deyja
og dóminum eftir þreyja.” (JÁ 1:223)

Death handled me roughly,
against death there is no defense;
death is sour and sweet,
yet he is surely in good condition
who dies in the Lord
and afterward endures the judgment.

For seventeenth century Icelanders, a theological connection to the story of Þorlákur’s death would have been reinforced by the hymns of the famous Icelandic hymnist, Halgrímur Pétursson (1614-1674). One of his most popular hymns, for instance, follows the trajectory of Jón Vídalín’s theology:

Með sínum dauða hann deyddi
Dauðann og sigur vann,
Makt hans og aflí eyddi.
Ekkert mig skaða kann.
Þó leggíst lík í jörðu
Lifir mín síla frí.
Hún mætir aldrei hörðu
Himneskri sælu í. (Hallgrímur Pétursson 230)

With his death he put death
to death and won the victory.
Its strength and power destroyed,
Nevermore can it hurt me.
Though my body be laid in the earth
My soul lives on free.
She will never meet with harshness,
In blissful eternity.

Based on this comparison, the tale of Þorlákur’s death suggests no conflict between accepted church doctrine and the fact that Reverend Þorlákur appears in a dream. After all, though we modern scholars manage to forget or ignore the point, the validity of Christian doctrine hinges upon the supernatural events of Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection, and further encompasses a plethora of supernatural events. Thus, the convergence we see here of ATU 365 and Christian doctrine would not be alarming to the Christian lay person in seventeenth century Iceland, provided that the supernatural events recorded in the tale did not diverge into pagan or otherwise heterodox belief systems.

The aforementioned tale of Reverend Þorlákur’s death and posthumous visitation in a dream would not seem to qualify as one of the unprofitable songs to which Guðbrandur refers, but other stories about Þorlákur certainly would. Þorlákur lived in Hörgárdalur, Iceland from 1711 to 1773. Though perhaps not properly a galdramadur, a magician, Þorlákur Þórarinsson was known to have the gift of second-sight (ófreskisgáfur) and was said to see huldufólk, or hidden people (whom we might call elves), in Eyjafjorður and other places (JÁ 3:20, 434, JÁ 3:588-9, JÁ 4:243, and JÁ 5:463-64). Perhaps not insignificantly, he was believed to have some talent for quieting troublesome ghosts (JÁ 3:588 and 3:589), and he is known for unusual methods of healing (JÁ 3:589).

He is said, also, to have known the details of his own death, which is quite a remarkable story of its own accord. Premonitions about the deaths of one’s self or of others are commonly used as literary topos or folkloristic motif in Iceland (Cormack 189), both before and after the Reformation, but this example offers particular insight. Þorlákur knew he would drown while crossing Hörgá river at a certain ford. As the story goes (JÁ 3:434), one day as he was leaving the church after a gathering, he came across a beautiful red foal tied to a post. Bystanders noticed that he was uncharacteristically interested in the foal, and after examining it carefully, Þorlákur sought after the owner and begged him to sell the horse to him. From then on this red foal became Þorlákur’s saddle horse, and it was on this horse that he drowned in Hörgá river. On the day of his death, he rode out with a companion, came to the ford and asked his companion to wait a moment. Þorlákur got off his horse, prostrated himself on the bank and prayed; after a time, he rose, mounted the red foal, and told his companion to proceed ahead of him. As his companion reached the opposite riverbank he looked back to find the foal in the middle of the river, rider-less. The important implication here is that Þorlákur knew, because of his second-sight, the appearance and features of the horse upon which he was to die, and rather than trying to escape his fate, Þorlákur made efforts to obtain the horse.

It must be stressed that Reverend Þorlákur was, as I say, a historical personage, and he lived in Hörgárdalur, in the north of Iceland. In fact, I suggest that it is not at all insignificant that Reverend Þorlákur lived and died on the very same river, not fifteen kilometers from the site where the Deacon of Myrká is said
to have died. That means that in the same region, on the same river, just a short horseback ride away, we have one active narrative that represents the pejorated version of ATU 365 (“The Deacon of Myrká”) and another narrative (about Þorlákur) that not only fills the functional void left by the pejorated ATU 365 but that does so by joining aspects of ATU 365, with its roots in paganism, with the dominant religious infrastructure of the day. In the one tale, we have a pejorated, aborted otherworldly journey into the afterlife; in the other, we have the fulfillment of that otherworldly journey, free of the pejoration present in ATU 365.

Final Thoughts

In this essay, I have suggested that the Icelandic folktale entitled “Djákinn á Myrká,” an example of the folktale type ATU 365, is a part of a legacy of belief that reaches back to a pre-Christian time. The development of the narrative from the earliest time to the post-medieval time has undergone a process of pejoration, which has brought about what amounts to the demonization of the dead Bridegroom in the story. I have furthermore suggested that this fundamental change has left this tale type wanting something, and, consequently, a closely correspondent group of tales has arisen, making up a folkloristic “adjacency pair,” in which a correspondent group of tales fills the void left by the pejoration of ATU 365.

Considerably more work is required to determine whether such adjacency pairs have developed around other examples of ATU 365 throughout the Indo-European world, but a cursory glance at some of other traditions suggests that different traditions address the problem differently, but each of these traditions seems to be compelled to deal with this pejoration in one way or another. In some, the hostile Bridegroom is said to be a rejected lover seeking revenge (JÁ 1:272-74; Mauer 73; Child 77C); in others, the romance of self-sacrifice seen in the Norse poetry remains to some extent, though it is not consummated (Child 77A and B); while in still others, a moral lesson of some kind is proposed (“Lenore” Bürger).

This variance is to be expected in such a widespread tale type, the many variants of which having been uniquely influenced by their respective cultural contexts, but there is another, perhaps more important lesson to be taken from the observations made here: folk narratives do not develop without purpose; they rather develop in response to the cultural, religious, and other influences around them. The “Deacon of Myrká” and its adjacent narratives develop in such a way as to create a narrative venue in which beliefs about death, Hell, and the afterlife might be sorted out. It is hard to call these stories “orthodox” according to the post-Reformation doctrine, but that is quite different from saying these stories are “pagan” or simply “heterodox.” They are a complicated blend of heterodoxy and orthodoxy. These stories indicate a desire to make sense of the religious context in which they were fostered. When a part of the narrative legacy becomes offensive to that context, the narrative suffers a pejoration. When the narrative
seems irrational within that religious context, adjacent narratives or variants crop up to accommodate the pressure of the irrationality.

It is not difficult to imagine how such adjacency pairs developed. During a long winter night in the north of Iceland, the kvöldvaka—that time of storytelling, singing of hymns, and perhaps reading from Vídalínspostilla—is a particularly lively one at a certain farm near the Hörgá river. Perhaps some guests have come from the neighboring farm to join the night’s festivities, and someone tells the story of the Deacon, who raged so violently after his unfortunate death. No one knows why he turned into such a devil when he died, and it is hard to imagine that he made it to Heaven. Then, thinking about that hymn of Hallgrímur Pétursson’s they sang just a few minutes earlier, someone asks: Have you heard the story of poor Reverend Þorlákur? He died just like the Deacon, even on the same river, though he wasn’t quite so nasty as the Deacon after he died . . . and I bet he’s sitting in Heaven at this very moment!

Notes

1 I presented a version of this essay at the 40th Mid-America Medieval Association Conference, Emporia, KS, September 2016.

2 For brevity, I use the abbreviation JÁ to refer to the six volume collection of Jón Árnason, entitled Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og Ævintýri, ed. Árni Böðvarsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 6 vols. (Reykjavík: Þjóðsaga, 1954-1961). For other Icelandic names, I honor the Icelandic practice of referring to Icelanders by their first rather than last name. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

3 Though there are at least five recorded variants of ATU 365 in Iceland, I will in this essay focus on “The Deacon of Myrká” because it is the most complete and most elegant of the five variants (JÁ 1:272-73 and 273-74, Mauer 73, and Einar Ólafur Sveinsson).

4 It is worth pointing out that it is not necessary that the ritual described in the Ibn Fadlan account be of Scandinavian origin for the connection between it and ATU 365 to hold. It only needs to be an observation of one of the cultures that supports ATU 365. This connection cannot be proven either, but given the broad distribution of the tale type throughout the Indo-European world, it seems quite reasonable to deduce that there may well be a connection based on comparative analysis.

5 For an involved discussion of this hypothesis, see Gunnell, The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia.

6 See Child 77 A-C for variations on this theme, in which, when the Bride desires to go with the deceased Bridegroom, it is typically the Bridegroom who charges her not to come.

The printing press was first introduced by Jón Arason, who seems to have made good use of it (Gunnar Karlsson 136).

For a thorough discussion of Jón Vídalín and *Vídalínspostilla*, see Gunnar Kristjánsson xv-civ.

There were other postilla, but none of them had the widespread influence that *Vídalínspostilla* could boast. See Gunnar Karlsson, *Iceland’s 1100 Years* 171 and Thordarsson 59.

For my reading of *Vídalínspostilla*, Sigurdur Arni Thordarson’s book, *Life and Limits*, has been an invaluable resource. Interested readers may also consider Arne Möller’s *Vídalínspostilla*; the Introduction (“Inngangur”) to the recent edition of the postilla, *Vídalínspostilla* and, for an English translation of selected sermons, Michael Fell’s *Whom Wind and Waves Obey*.

This quotation from *En nij Psalmabok* in the above epigraph is most accessible in Driscoll 14. See, however, *En nij Psalmabok* at http://baekur.is/is/bok/000603210/0/23/Ein_ny_Psalma_Bok__Bls_23. My translation, like Driscoll’s, is based on Guðbrandur Vigfússon 2:388, although note several small changes I have made to bring the translation closer to the original, if less agreeable aesthetically.

For works by Icelandic authors, I have followed the Icelandic convention of listing them by their first names.

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Christmas Eve of the Living Dead: The Satanic Draugr

Kent Pettit

Abstract

Grettis Saga and Eyrbyggja Saga present episodes of paranormal encounters featuring reanimated corpses that are usually sinister in nature, anti-Christian, and murderous. In their frequent hostility to the Christian faith, which was new to Iceland during the time in which these stories take place, these creatures could represent for Icelanders the loosening of Satan’s grip on their homeland, the last vestiges of the old paganism, demonic creatures driven out by the new faith, and old and dark fears obliterated by the light of Christ. These corporeal undead appear at Christmas more than any other time of the year. I will argue that these corpses reanimate to oppose the incarnated Christ, the divine second person of the Trinity, who has been born into the world in corporeal form and who subsequently dies, resurrects, and thereby defeats Satan and his forces. These creatures that are reanimated, perhaps representing a perverted version of the Resurrection, could be interpreted as the “undead battalion” of Satan’s demonic forces at the time of Icelandic conversion. This article examines these Icelandic “zombie apocalypses” and attempts to answer the compelling questions raised by the re-appearance of the physically and spiritually dead. I also examine revenant creatures and the Church’s efforts to destroy them in William of Newburgh’s History of English Affairs, Geoffrey of Burton’s The Life and Miracles of St. Modwenna, and Walter Map’s De Nugis Curialium.

Both Grettis saga and Eyrbyggja saga present several episodes of supernatural encounters featuring reanimated corpses that are usually sinister in nature, anti-Christian, and murderous. In their frequent hostility to the Christian faith, which was new to Iceland during the time in which these stories take place, these corporeal undead may represent the last vestiges of the old paganism, perhaps seen as sinister by these anonymous saga writers. What makes these chilling tales even more disturbing is that these corporeal undead, usually referred to as draugar, often appear at Christmas.

Contests between Christianity and paganism at Christmastime are actually quite common in Icelandic folk legends, especially in stories with elves, trolls, and ogres. However, the clashes with draugar are just as intense as those with other sinister creatures. They could be returning to oppose the incarnated Christ as minions of Satan in a perverted version of the Resurrection. The saga writers might also hope to elicit in response a spiritual revival in Iceland. This article will
examine these sagas’ “zombie apocalypses” and attempt to answer the compelling questions raised by the re-appearance of the physically and spiritually dead.

To understand the context of this discussion, we must remember that the entire nation of Iceland had adopted Christianity in either the year 999 or 1000, but people could continue certain practices like infanticide, eating horsemeat, and offering sacrifices to pagan gods, though these acts were now to be done privately (Orri Vésteinsson 17). Our knowledge of the day-to-day life of early Icelandic Christianity is very limited, though we do know that Icelandic conversion was, in fact, more about political unity than about eternal salvation, and the conversion may not have affected many people’s lives initially. This lack of change is suggested by the slowness of the new faith to substantially establish Christian institutions through much of the eleventh-century (18). We do not know whether new converts had to be pushed to attend Mass or if they willingly and enthusiastically went. As late as 1100, a sizable minority of Icelanders may have continued to feel little reason for attending Mass and practicing piety (88). The fact that churches were understaffed likely made the transition more difficult and accommodations all the more common because of a lack of proper catechesis. The possibility that there could have been pockets of resistance makes sense.

Though written 200-300 years after when their stories take place and after the Icelandic conversion, Grettis saga and Eyrbyggja saga describe ambivalent and sometimes even hostile attitudes toward the Church. No one was as negative toward the new faith as Glámr, an anti-social shepherd eventually turned murderous, undead revenant monster in Grettis saga. The foreboding Glámr is inordinately large, physically powerful, irascible, and bizarre in appearance. When he arrives to work for a farmer named Þórhallr, he promptly reveals his poor manners and unlikable nature when he abruptly and threateningly warns his employer, “I become angry when crossed” (71; ch. 32).

On top of these intimidating and repellent qualities, Glámr is fiercely anti-Christian. He makes known his disdain for this new religion and its practices, particularly the Christmas Eve fast. He prefers “the old ways,” never goes to Mass, hates chanting, “had absolutely no faith,” and he is “rough and repulsive, and everyone found him thoroughly obnoxious” (71; ch. 32). He is most offensive to Þórhallr’s unnamed devout wife. On Christmas Eve, he demands his food, but she informs him that it is their duty not to eat on this fast day. He then calls such practices of Christian piety “superstitions” and claims that people are no better off under Christianity and its “nonsense” than they were before under paganism, and he again demands his food at once. Þórhallr’s wife warns him that “this will be a sorry day for you, since you take this evil course” (71-72; ch. 32). At this, Glámr threatens that “it would be the worse for her” if she further refuses her, and after finishing his meal, he leaves the house in “an ugly mood” (72; ch. 32).

Such words and behavior during his life, particularly those insulting to Christianity, perhaps foreshadow his hostility in his (un)death. After he is killed that Christmas Eve night by an unknown creature, his body is discovered the next morning, and the search party sees that the corpse is dark blue in color and has become so bloated that it is larger than the size of an ox (72; ch. 32). Glámr’s
hostility and fierce abhorrence to Christianity during his life may be connected to his reanimation in death and represent a certain sinister opposition to Christ’s Nativity. Physical evidence quickly surfaces that Glámr’s beliefs and behavior in life are reaping retributive consequences in death.

Once his body is found (but before he reanimates), his enormous corpse is mysteriously prevented on both the first and second days of Christmas from being taken to the church. He is, therefore, unable to enter the church in death, even as he refused to in life. Interestingly enough, on the third day/attempt to retrieve his body, a priest accompanies the villagers, but this time, they cannot find the corpse at all. The priest refuses to go out with them the fourth day. It is then that the body is immediately found when the priest is not with the search party. However, the attempt to bring Glámr to the church is abandoned, and the searchers bury him without the Christian burial rite where they had found his body (72; ch. 32). In horror literature and film, monsters and revenants are often threatened by or otherwise avoid Christian rites and symbols (e.g., vampires, demons, etc.). Perhaps undead evil in this case has been resistant to the priest’s presence, or the undead Glámr intentionally keeps his distance from the Church in death, just as he had in life.

A more affable shepherd named Þórgautr eventually gets hired as Glámr’s replacement, and the walking dead Glámr promptly kills him on Christmas Eve the next year, once again while everyone else is at Mass (73-74; ch. 33). Glámr then goes on a killing spree through the countryside. Þórgautr’s corpse is safely retrieved on Christmas morning at what had been Glámr’s burial mound. Þórgautr’s neck and every bone in his body are broken. Unlike with Glámr, the people are able to get Þórgautr back to the church, even though he himself is a large man. The ease of transportation of his body and subsequent church burial likely demonstrate that his soul is holier than Glámr’s. Even more suggestive of this holier status is that Þórgautr’s corpse does not reanimate or cause anyone harm thereafter (74; ch. 33). Glámr, on the other hand, now wreaks more havoc and slaughter than ever. Virtually no one is left on the farm except Þórhallr and his wife. The last remaining farmhand is killed when Glámr breaks his back on a stone slab. After this, Þórhallr and his wife finally leave. The undead Glámr has completely taken over. He slays people and animals and lays waste to the entire valley until he is finally killed once and for all by Grettir Ásmundarson, the hero of the saga.

The draugr legend could also be related to an episode later in Grettis saga, when Grettir learns of the disappearance of a man named Þórstein the White (135; ch. 64). Þórstein had disappeared while his wife Steinvör was at Christmas Eve Mass, and then, his servant disappears the next year while everyone else is, again, at Christmas Eve Mass. We then learn that trolls have killed both of them. Ármann Jakobsson intriguingly suggests that “troll” sometimes means “draugr” (285). The Christmas Eve Vigil particularly seems to draw out the murderous undead or otherwise evil monsters. There is the argument that the undead favor the dark and could be resisting the daylight that has just come about through the Winter Solstice (Sayers 243), but this phenomenon might be rooted in much more than that. Such attacks more likely relate to the Nativity representing the coming
of new life, both of God Incarnate and of the new spiritual life that he brings to the faithful. Such divine and eternal life might threaten the evil of an undead or sinister existence roaming the transitory earth.

Eyrbyggja saga features even more of the undead, including some almost as disruptive as Glámr. Two reanimated corpses, Þóroddr and Þórir Wood-Leg, gather bands of other draugar to harass a household, and like Glámr, this crowd of walking dead haunts people during Advent and Christmas. A total of six people die at the hands of these undead at the beginning of Advent (138-41; ch. 54-55). The text states that the Advent fast, however, was not observed in those days, as well as reporting, “At that time a good many heathen beliefs still prevailed, though people were baptized and supposed to be Christians” (138; ch. 54).

Since there is no pious practice or spiritual force to stop the hauntings, a ghostly seal bizarrely appears to a household shortly before Christmas. Repeated blows to its head do not keep it from continuing to rise and to look at a canopy on the bed of Þórgunna, a disagreeable woman who dies and reanimates because she did not receive a Christian burial (137; ch. 53). These attacks and appearances occur especially when proper Christian observances that would otherwise expel them are not observed. The repeated appearances of Þóroddr and Þórir Wood-Leg and their undead bands of men at Advent and Christmas provide further evidence of this theory.

Only the authority of a church-sanctioned court following Icelandic law and the power of a follow-up house blessing are able to expel them. The dead are summoned to a court hearing initiated by a priest (140-41; ch. 55). The proper procedure for an Icelandic law court is followed here, even for dead people. There is a jury, eyewitness testimony, and cases summed up for deliberation. As Þórir Wood-Leg’s sentence is read, he stands up and protests, “I sat here as long as people would let me” and then walks out (140; ch. 55). His declaration might suggest that as long as there is this backsliding into paganism—that is, the failure to properly carry out liturgical observances at Advent and allowing heathen beliefs to prevail—the undead will remain. It could actually be up to the Christians to rise to the occasion, cast off their old pagan ways, and spiritually take control of their own house. Interestingly, Þórir’s response also reveals that the Icelandic undead tend to retain some level of postmortem intelligence and are not entirely like mindless zombies.

During another sentencing, one convicted corpse merely concludes, “I’ll go now, and it seems I should have gone a lot sooner” (141; ch. 55). It seems like he knows he has been caught, particularly when he is confronted by a Christian law court and the observance of Christian rites. Next, a dead woman named Þórgrima Witch-Face reacts the same way as Þórir had: “I stayed as long as you would let me” (141; ch. 55). The text describes how each one is sentenced, gets up, “make(s) some remark,” and leaves (141; ch. 55). None of them want to go, but they have no choice. Þórooddr is the last, commenting, “There’s no peace here. We’d best all be on our way” (141; ch. 55).

After this orderly court adjourns and all of the undead have been cast out, the priest carries holy water and relics “to every corner of the house” (141; ch.
The next day he sings the prayers and “celebrates Mass with great solemnity” and also hears confessions (141; ch. 55). The effective remedies for dealing with walking corpses are a church-sanctioned court, and after that, the sacraments and sacramentals used to spiritually cleanse and fortify the house and all the people. These actions are the only weapons that defeat the undead in this episode. We hear then that no undead ever haunted there again. Christ and the Church have an extraordinary and authoritative power over the Undead and paranormal. These attacks and hauntings might also be one last gasp of paganism in Eyrbyggja Saga. Þóroddr, Þórir Wood-Leg, and their small horde remain as long as Christianity is not actively practiced, but they immediately leave when it is. The people fall back into the old ways in times of crisis and loss, and therefore, sinister consequences result. The evil dead return during these times of backsliding. The walking dead haunt and kill people when Christianity is not actively practiced, but leave at once when the Church exercises authority over them. These episodes are poignant examples of Christian authority gaining the upper hand over undead creatures, corporeal beings that have risen up against Christ but suffer defeat at his hands.

Failure to observe Christian practices also occurs in other sagas as well, such as Eírík saga rauða (or the Saga of Erik the Red), with draugar appearing as a consequence there, too, though not quite in the same troublesome way that Þóroddr and Þórir do in Eyrbyggja. Þórir Eiriksson dies, reanimates, and requests to speak with his wife Gudrid. The undead Þórir exhorts Gudrid to be a faithful Christian and to make sure Christians are buried in consecrated ground, as they have not been thus far post-conversion (663-64; ch. 6). Þórir is an exception to the malevolent draugar that we see in other sagas such as Eírík saga rauða. He is no less undead, but he specifically reanimates for the purpose of encouraging Christian piety, and he explicitly opposes the lingering pagan practice of unconsecrated burial for Christian believers. In contrast to Glámr, Þóroddr, and Þórir Wood-Leg, Þórstinn is perhaps reanimated by God to exhort Gudrid and other recently converted people to a deeper commitment of faith. Even if, on the other hand, he may not be resurrected directly by God, he does not return to life to oppose God like Glámr, nor is he present to punish or afflict backsliders like the Eyrbyggja undead. If anything, he reanimates to preach and encourage. From the textual evidence, Þórstinn is also the only one of the undead in any of these three sagas who receives a Christian burial in consecrated ground. However, not unlike the more sinister draugar, his undead existence ends only after proper authoritative Church-sanctioned action, which is at his behest in this case.

Grettis saga and Eyrbyggja saga are not the only medieval accounts of malevolent reanimated corpses. Britain has its own share of revenant stories. Like their Icelandic counterparts, these other texts suggest that the undead are suppressed by the supernatural actions of the Church. Perhaps the most famous of these accounts is twelfth-century Augustinian canon and historian William of Newburgh’s History of English Affairs. William writes in the shadow of the Norman Conquest of England, which was still relatively recent in his lifetime. He was of Anglo-Saxon descent, and he accused Norman court writers such as
Geoffrey of Monmouth of hijacking English history, turning it into mythology, and spurning the historical records of Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. He sets out to provide an accurate and thoroughly researched history from William the Conqueror’s invasion in 1066 to his own day, vowing to avoid mythological tales of King Arthur or other non-factual stories perpetuated by Geoffrey of Monmouth (1. Preface. 2-10).

Writing over a century before the first Icelandic sagas were penned, William presents what he regards as eyewitness accounts of revenants terrorizing entire villages and the Christian faithful. Nancy Mandevalle Caciola writes of how the Germanic cultures of Northern Europe held in common stories of the corporeal dead harassing the living. Germanic peoples viewed the “liminal state between life and death” as corporeal: the returning dead were revenants, not ghosts, as Southern Europeans traditionally believed (110). Caciola further claims:

> Clearly, belief in the return of the certain dead people was widespread across northern Europe, a form of popular belief that descended from anterior pagan traditions about the wandering corporeally embodied dead. These older traditions persisted into the medieval Christian world, shifting meaning over time to become a set of horror stories about the unruly, aggressive dead. (232)

If these legends were indeed widespread across Europe, there is little question that both Icelandic and English writers would be open to the existence of reanimated corpses, and despite obvious cultural and contextual differences, both the Icelandic saga tradition and William of Newburgh feature the undead exhibiting hostile behavior toward the Church.

William writes of a man in the County of Buckingham who died but appeared in reanimated form on several consecutive nights (5.22.1-2). The townspeople seek the help of the Church. William describes how the people reported these events and attacks to Archdeacon Stephen, William’s informant. Stephen then relays the events to the Bishop of Lincoln. The Bishop gives a letter of absolution to Stephen in order to see what the state of the corpse would be. The corpse was found in the same condition as when it was buried, and the letter of absolution was placed on the corpse’s breast. Thereafter, this revenant was never seen again. The terror it caused was ended, but it took the Church to bring peace and put down the threat.

The uncorrupted state of this man’s corpse is notable here and worth further comment. Medieval tales and saints’ lives sometimes describe a lack of decomposition to holy persons’ corpses, or dead bodies otherwise preserved for holy purposes. One of the most famous of the latter comes from the poem *St. Erkenwald*, a saint’s life based on Erkenwald, the Bishop of London in the late seventh-century. A mysterious tomb is discovered on the site of the new St. Paul’s Cathedral in recently converted London. Until the city’s Christianization, this spot had been a pagan shrine. The sarcophagus is from a bygone era, and inside of it is “a body of blissful appearance” (78). As St. Erkenwald prays over
the corpse, it reanimates (190-92). The corpse tells him that he had been a judge during the pagan centuries before. Though he was just, this undead magistrate laments that he died before he could hear the Christian gospel (289-312). Erkenwald sheds a tear that “baptizes” him. At that point, the corpse disintegrates into dust, and the judge goes to heaven (321-48). For a moment, the restricted boundary between the living and the dead is relaxed when the judge reanimates. This time, however, the reactivation of the corpse is at God’s behest, not something malevolent (177-96). Apparently, this dead man has been in a liminal state since his death long ago, residing in neither the realm of the living nor the dead, but waiting for salvation.

On the other hand, evil corpses could also remain uncorrupted, at least long enough for them to reanimate. However, these corpses are only uncorrupted shortly after death, not centuries later like the judge in St. Erkenwald. This characteristic makes the evil medieval undead similar to modern zombies, who are usually recently deceased. It is also a slight contrast to certain draugar, such as Glámr, whose corpse is horribly bloated and discolored. Caciola reports that people especially feared those who died young or unexpectedly. Their reanimated corpses could return in short order and commit violence against the living (110). Caciola suggests, “The fresher the cadaver, the more dangerous it is” (238). This is the reason why some were buried with stones in their mouths, decapitated, or had their hearts cut out.

There are also accounts in which demonic spirits seem to preserve the condition of corpses they possess. For example, a mid-thirteenth-century Dominican friar tells of a demon animating the corpse of a beautiful young woman in order to tempt a devout man. When the demon leaves the body, the corpse decomposes (Caciola 210). Once the corpse (or demon) is defeated, decomposition seems to occur naturally. According to Jean-Claude Schmitt, these undead are an inversion of the saintly incorruptible dead, and their unburied state prior to being “put down” is actually accursed suffering. They were “condemned not to decompose in the ground…their bodies were imputrescible” (Schmitt 200). However, if they are properly dealt with, the bodies can be disposed of, albeit not always by burial in a consecrated graveyard, as seen in other of William of Newburgh’s accounts.

One reanimation William describes explicitly links the undead to Satan himself. In Berwick, in northern England, a dead man returns to life (5.23.1). After his burial, the man climbs out of his grave during the night and starts terrorizing the neighborhood. No one would venture out during the night out of fear of an encounter with the undead. Only after this walking corpse is cut into pieces and incinerated is peace restored. In William’s words, this revenant is “carried by Satan” (5.23.1). Satan is the one who reanimates the corpse, and the undead are apparently among his forces, or minions as it were, and once again, the Church is the only force capable of destroying the threat.

William also tells of a noblewoman’s chaplain who died and was entombed at his monastery. He had been a very worldly and unfaithful priest. He rises from his grave one night, going around making loud moans and groans, but is prevented from attacking those in the monastery “by the meritorious resistance
of its holy inmates” (5.24.2). When he goes to haunt the noblewoman, a friar offers prayers for her and promises a quick remedy. Here, too, the reanimated corpse is called an instrument of Satan. The friar chases the undead priest to his grave and burns the corpse (5.24.2). As with the modern zombies of horror filmmaker George A. Romero, other of William’s revenants, and some of the Icelandic draugar (such as Glámr), only burning the corpse ends the threat of the undead, but once again, it is Church intervention that is the solution for dealing with them.

In addition to William of Newburgh’s accounts, there are other chroniclers who include eyewitness testimonies of the walking dead in their own historical accounts. Walter Map, a twelfth-century Welsh churchman, writes in his De Nugis Curialium of an English knight who turns to the Bishop of Hereford for advice on how to deal with a reanimated dead man. Four nights after the man’s death, his corpse begins returning to the village every night. He calls out the names of various people, and they subsequently fall ill and die, to the point that most of the village ends up dead. The Bishop surmises that a demon inhabits the man’s corpse. To stop this creature, the Bishop instructs the knight to disinter the body, decapitate it, and sprinkle both corpse and grave with holy water (203-05). Walter also writes of a dead man in Worcester who wanders around. The Bishop orders that a cross be laid upon the man’s grave. When the corpse walks to his grave and sees the cross, he runs in the other direction. When the cross is removed, the man sinks into the ground, and the earth swallows him up. At that point, the cross is laid again, and the man returns no more (205).

In The Life and Miracles of St. Modwenna, written sometime between 1118 and 1150 by Geoffrey, the Abbot of Burton, from Burton Abbey in Staffordshire, two dead peasants reanimate and begin roaming around the village, carrying their coffins, and sometimes changing into the shapes of various animals. They bang on the houses of the living, shouting, “Move quickly, move! Get going! Come!” (195, 197). These villagers begin to die, and so as a remedy, the two undead men are decapitated and have their hearts ripped out and burned (197). These particular dead are apparently sinister in nature also, though very little else is said about them. The account does seem to fit the pattern of William of Newburgh’s evil revenants: similar undead behavior and similar means of permanently destroying them. Like with the lay people and clergy encountering William’s revenants, the occurrences in the Burton account are reported to the Bishop for his direction and intercession. The Bishop suggests that the revenants are indeed satanic, perhaps even actual demons inhabiting the corpses. When the hearts of the undead are burned up, an evil spirit is seen in the form of a crow flying out of the fire (197).

Wherever these stories take place, be they Icelandic, English, or Welsh, their writers apparently believed in the veracity of these chilling accounts. These phenomena are not tall tales or mere parables to these authors. For the English and Welsh medieval historians, revenants are real-life satanically inspired creatures meant to harm the faithful, but they also demonstrate the power of the Church in actual spiritual (and corporeal!) warfare, acting in Christ’s name and under His authority. Even for the Icelandic saga writers, whose stories are not
written as historical chronicles, the accounts of *draugar* are not taken to be mythical legends without root in historical events. The characters in the sagas are based on real individuals and families who settled, populated, and controlled Iceland. The *draugar* hauntings are understood by the authors as true events resulting from calamities or irresponsible behavior, and they necessitate resolution, including Christian intervention and ritual.

Perhaps the most central meaning of these sinister walking corpses is that only the power of Christ, as wielded by the Church, can defeat these undead satanic creatures, some of which are even explicitly described as corporeal demons. However, why is it so important to these authors, writing in their respective traditions, to tell such gruesome and horrifying stories to proclaim the power of God? The answer lies in how they fundamentally viewed the world and eternity. In their worldview, there were undoubtedly winners and losers on the cosmic battlefield, and they clearly understood that a sinister evil relentlessly opposed the supernatural good.

To the medieval mind, these concepts were not relative. They were to be interpreted literally, not figuratively. Medieval Christians firmly believed that Satan was real, horrifying, and murderous and that his assaults on the faithful were constant and deadly. However, by the power and authority of Christ as exercised by the Church, the faithful had nothing to fear. The victory was theirs, and the satanic threat of the monstrous undead could be obliterated. In the tradition of 1 Corinthians 15:26, which declares, “And the enemy death shall be destroyed last,” *draugar* and other revenants embody death, not just because they are reanimated corpses but also because they represent a corporeal reality, rather than a spiritual abstraction, that relentlessly returns to wreak destruction until it is destroyed by Christ once for all.

As suggested by the authors of *Grettis saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*, William of Newburgh, Walter Map, and Geoffrey of Burton, reanimated corpses seemed to fascinate medieval audiences as much as the hypothetical zombie apocalypse fascinates twenty-first century audiences. However, it was the uncanniness of the dead returning to life and seeking living victims at the behest of Satan that captivated these spellbound medieval audiences, rather than the storyline that we are more used to today: the dead reanimating as a result of radiation-fallout, pathogens, or otherwise unexplained phenomena.

Ever holding fast to their belief in the cosmic clash between good and evil, many medieval Christians would have been drawn to stories of Christ and the Church heroically and decisively destroying these wicked reanimated corpses. The resurrection and presence of the incarnate Christ, indeed the very incarnation that the Icelandic *draugar* oppose so fiercely during the Christmas season, elicited trust in God, courage in the face of evil, and freedom from the demonic. On a more collective level, the defeat of the undead could represent the retreat of the last sinister vestiges of the old paganism, the loosening of the grip of Satan on Iceland, and old, dark fears obliterated by the light of a new gospel.

These corpses reanimate to oppose the incarnate Christ, who has been born into the world in corporeal form and who subsequently dies, resurrects, and thereby defeats Satan and his forces. These creatures that are reanimated, perhaps
representing a perverted version of the Resurrection, could be interpreted as the “undi7ed battalion” of Satan’s demonic forces doing battle against Icelandic conversion. These minions are therefore threatened by the incarnation and birth of the Corporeal God. By depicting this titanic struggle between the Church and the undead, Christ and Satan, the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century saga writers could be seeking some kind of cultural transformation in their own time that is just as dramatic as the original conversion, pushing for a spiritual revival in Iceland that is rooted in an appreciation of the supernatural power of Christ over evil. In essence, these chilling tales remind Icelanders of the greatness of their cultural conversion from paganism and their faith that has overcome evil monsters, demons, and the living dead.

Notes

1 “Grettis” is the genitive form of the nominative proper noun “Grettir,” the hero of this saga.

2 In Old Norse, draugar is the nominative plural form of the singular draugr.

Works Cited


The Problem of Emotion: Legal Codes and the Medieval Icelandic Outlaw

Matthew R. Bardowell

Abstract

The Icelandic family sagas tell of the events surrounding the ninth-century settlement of Iceland and its conversion to Christianity at the beginning of the eleventh century. These early inhabitants were farmers primarily concerned with working the new land, and this social environment necessitated methods for settling disputes that arose from encroaching neighbors and new settlers. Ultimately, those who cannot live by the rule of law fall outside of it and the protections it affords. These men are labeled “outlaws.” The character of the outlaw is a lonely figure in medieval Icelandic society. Outlaws are cast out from society and haunt the lonely inland places in an effort to survive the vulnerability that outlawry brings. The outlaw occupies a unique place in Icelandic society precisely because they stand outside of it, and from this vantage point they are well-suited to shed light on the limitations of the moral and legal codes that can find no place for them. This paper will show that the early Icelandic legal codes fail to account for the extreme emotions that they aim to neutralize. If this is the case, the Icelandic outlaw is not always a senseless killer or value-less criminal but sometimes a figure humanized by his emotional complexity and marginalized by a culture in which these emotions are to be suppressed. As such, these outlaws have value for the modern reader in that they show the consequences of a legal system in which significant elements of humanity fail to be acknowledged.

The medieval Icelandic outlaw appears in a number of thirteenth-century prose works known as the Icelandic family sagas (Íslendingasögur). While the manuscripts that contain these sagas are dated to the thirteenth century, the events depicted within predate these works by nearly 400 years. They center on the ninth-century emigration of the Norwegian middle class to Iceland during the reign of King Haraldr Fair-hair. Those who left Norway settled Iceland and began farming it and governing it themselves, and to this end in the year 930 Iceland established the first parliamentary system of government called the Alþingi (“The Parliament” or “General Assembly”) (An Icelandic-English Dictionary 18). This assembly was an annual meeting at which Iceland’s Lawspeaker (Lögsögumaðr) would recite one-third of the law and at which Iceland’s chieftains would adjudicate between conflicting parties in legal matters that had arisen in the preceding year. In his introduction to Three Icelandic Outlaw Sagas, Anthony Faulkes offers some insight into how the early Icelandic legal system
operated. “Offenses,” he explains, “were regarded as injuries to individuals or families, whether they caused loss of property, limbs or life, or were perceived as damage to a person’s or family’s honour, and the injured parties could claim compensation or honour-payments” (Faulkes xix). If the offending party agreed to such an arrangement and rendered payment, the offense was considered settled in the eyes of the law.

Because medieval Icelandic society was self-governed and its inhabitants made their homes on newly settled farmland, the law was equated with the Icelandic way of life (xxi).2 Thus illegal behavior was antisocial behavior, and, apart from fines, antisocial behavior might also result in outlawry. Medieval Iceland knew two types of outlawry: “lesser” and “full” (Medieval Scandinavia 460). “Lesser” outlawry carried a three-year term at the end of which the outlawed person might be reintegrated into Icelandic society (460). “Full” outlawry was permanent. No one was permitted to aid an individual sentenced to full outlawry, and anyone could kill the outlaw without fear of legal consequences. For medieval Iceland, the ultimate penalty for antisocial behavior was social exclusion (Faulkes xix), and these excluded men took on a sub-human status. An apt example of this dehumanization is the Old Norse word vargr, which can mean either “outlaw” or “wolf” (Medieval Scandinavia 460; An Icelandic-English Dictionary 680).

Unlike the medieval English outlaw, the medieval Icelandic outlaw was not a figure idealized for his rebellion against unjust authority (Faulkes xxi). For early Icelandic settlers, the authority was back in Norway, and those in Iceland could all claim the status of rebel for escaping King Haraldr’s heavy hand. In a broad sense, the Icelandic outlaw’s antagonist would have been Icelandic society. It remains unclear, however, exactly what characterizes the Icelandic outlaw as being outside of a society that already views itself as rebellious. This article, therefore, explores which qualities characterize the medieval Icelandic outlaw. Because we can define the Icelandic outlaw in contrast to the society from which he has been rejected, I will argue that what makes a man susceptible to outlawry is his inability to value certain embedded societal codes, namely the medieval Icelandic value of pragmatism and the compulsion to conceal one’s emotions. To demonstrate this argument, I will focus primarily on Brennu-Njáls saga,3 the longest and, arguably, the most well-developed of the Icelandic family sagas, but I will also show examples from several other places in the Old Norse literary corpus to show the pervasive nature of the ethics I aim to demonstrate.

Before discussing Brennu-Njáls saga, it may be helpful to offer some context for the legal environment in which the saga is situated. The rules and procedures that governed offenses in medieval Iceland were codified in a text known as Grágás—a name which literally means “grey goose” (Dennis, Foote, and Perkins 9). How this peculiar name came to be attached to this compilation of Icelandic laws is a mystery, but the literal meaning of Grágás as applied to these laws is largely believed to be the result of a linguistic misunderstanding (Foote 9). We know with certainty that the Icelanders undertook a written compilation of these laws in the year 1117 A.C.E. because there is an account of the decision in Íslendingabók, which Ari Þorgilsson composes to chronicle the
Among these laws are the provisions for lesser and full outlawry. If one is sentenced to lesser outlawry, he must pay an amount called a “life-ring” to a chieftain, submit to a confiscation court that would oversee the forfeiture of his personal property, and seek a way to leave the country (Grágás 92-95, 250). Despite this temporary revocation of rights, a man sentenced to lesser outlaw still benefitted from Icelandic law as the confiscation court was “extensively regulated,” and the outlaw enjoyed immunity as he attempted to leave Iceland and during his time abroad (250). Full outlawry was far more harsh, withdrawing the limited protections that lesser outlawry conferred (96-98). Members of Icelandic society faced outlawry themselves if they were to bring outlaws back into the country, and it was not legal to harbor an outlaw or even offer him any advice that might save him from being killed (119-20, 171).

A significant amount of Brennu-Njáls saga is devoted to legal matters such as the ones mentioned above. The action of the saga spans the time of Iceland’s settlement in the late ninth century, the establishment of the Alþingi in the first-third of the tenth century, the division of Iceland into Quarter Courts in the middle of the tenth century, and Iceland’s national conversion to Christianity in the year 1000 A.C.E.. In terms of narrative, the saga is organized around two threads, both involving the grisly deaths of the saga’s main characters: Gunnar Hámundarson, a renowned chieftain, and Njáll Porgeirsson, one of Iceland’s most prominent farmers and lawyers. Of Njáll, the saga remarks that “Hann var lǫgmaðr svá mikill, at engi fannsk hans jafningi, vitr var hann ok forspár, heilráðr ok góðgjarn, ok varð allt at ráði, þat er hann réð mǫnnum” (He was so great a lawyer that his equal was not found, he was wise and prescient, gave good counsel and was benevolent, and all his counsel came to good ends) (Brennu-Njáls saga 57; ch. 20).5 Much of the saga develops the friendship between Gunnar and Njáll and records a feud between their families that they are able to settle time and again through adopting a pragmatic attitude toward the injuries they sustain. Later in the saga, Gunnar refuses to abide by a settlement and, thus, dies as an outlaw. Njáll’s sons kill a newly appointed chieftain as the result of an unresolved feud, and a man named Flosi Þórðarson is incited to avenge this fallen chieftain. As a result, Flosi and a gang of men burn Njáll and his family alive inside their home.

As these two narrative threads play out, several actions initiate and perpetuate feuds between important families, and the characters attempt to settle these feuds in an effort to avoid the cycle of violence that the Icelandic legal codes were designed to curtail. Through these scenes, a dichotomy emerges between those who are able to put aside their desire for vengeance in favor of pragmatic solutions and those who cannot. Njáll, perhaps the most well-known pragmatist in the family sagas, best encapsulates his approach to conflict when he says, “með lǫgum skal land várt byggja, en með ólǫgum eyða” (with laws shall our country be built, but it will be destroyed with lawlessness) (172; ch. 70). It is Gunnar’s and Njáll’s wives who continue to incite injury against each other’s families, and the two men make earnest efforts to save their friendship by brokering fair settlements for the slayings of their servants. However, despite
their best efforts to maintain peace, the cycle of violence continues unabated. At one point, Gunnar recognizes the pouch of money Njáll pays him for one of his servants as exactly the one he paid to Njáll for a previous killing: “Njáll tók fésjóðinn ok seldi Gunnari. Gunnarr kenndi féit, at þat var it sama sem hann hafði honum greitt” (Njáll took the money-bag and gave it to Gunnar. Gunnar recognized the money, because it was the same as he had paid to Njáll) (99; ch. 37). It is as if the money changing hands in compensation for these killings has been earmarked for the next murder. In one sense, the men brokering settlements accept compensation, but in another sense the fact that they set aside the money they accept suggests that vengeance is something both parties seem to expect. Njáll’s hope that laws will help the country flourish seems in doubt. These examples call into question the Icelandic legal system’s efficacy to bring about true reconciliation. After each murder, judgment was accepted and a settlement paid with the right hand, and for each murder vengeance is exacted with the left. This dilemma raises a question: is reconciliation truly possible in a legal system for which the emotions that arise from these crimes are not addressed? As settlements fail, the crimes escalate and eventually lead to outlawry because these pragmatic agreements do not satisfy those who are injured by the offense.

As I have already mentioned, Njáll and Gunnar neutralize the feud threatening to drive a wedge between their families by setting aside emotional demands for vengeance in favor of monetary settlement. The reader may understand the pragmatic interests of these men as a microcosm of the nation’s collective desire to have order and peace in a newly settled country. Such an interest seems to be so deeply engrained in the medieval Icelandic mind that when Christianity does come to the island in 1000, Iceland appears to adopt it more out of a desire for national stability than out of a desire to adhere to a true faith. In keeping with his judicious nature, Njáll is among Christianity’s early supporters in Iceland. Throughout the chapters that deal with Iceland’s religious shift, Þangbrandr, a missionary from Norway, seems to believe that prowess with a sword is the best sermon. Instead of a shield, he wields a crucifix, and he is most persuasive when he kills representatives of the old faith in combat (ch. 101). From this we see that medieval Icelandic culture valued efficacy, and Þangbrandr’s success in battle speaks to the power prospective converts can hope to find in the new faith.

The saga’s depiction of Iceland’s formal conversion to Christianity also speaks to this pragmatic approach to religion. Until the Althing in 1000, Iceland had been divided between those who wish to maintain the old ways and those wanting to adopt the new faith. In this version of the story, the decision to accept Christianity is placed in the hands of the Lawspeaker named Þorgeirr—a “heiðinn” (heathen) (271; ch. 105). For Þorgeirr, such a division will not do, and he offers this as a rationale: “Svá lízk mér sem málmum várum sé komit í ónýtt efni, ef eigi hafa ein lǫg allir, en ef sundr skipt er lǫgnum, þá mun ok sundr skipt fröðnum, ok mun eigi við þat mega búa” (It seems to me that our affairs would be brought to a useless state if we all do not have one law, and if the law is torn asunder, then peace will be torn asunder also, and we would not be able to live with that) (271-2; ch. 105). Both factions agree to abide by Þorgeirr’s ruling, and
he decides that “menn skulu allir vera kristnir hér á landi ok trúa á einn guð” (all men are to be Christians in this country and believe in one God) (272; ch. 105). While the phrasing here appears to be an attempt to legislate belief, the penalty for breaking such a law only underscores the pragmatic rationale for conversion. He goes on to tell the assembly that dalliances with the old ways, such as exposing infants and eating horse flesh, will be punished by lesser outlawry if done openly, but if these acts are performed “secretly” (leyniliga), then they will be “without penalty” (vítislaust) (272; ch. 105). In this way, Þorgeirr forgoes the ideal of converting to Christianity as a profound response to a new faith in favor of converting because it is the most efficacious way to ensure societal harmony.

The outlaw, who is in a state of disharmony with society, fails to make decisions in such a pragmatic way. The outlaw tends to be spurred to action by intense emotions, and the societal pressure to conceal emotion is consistent with Iceland’s ethical pragmatism. This suppression of emotion is not something for which the legal code is necessarily responsible. It would be perhaps more accurate to say that the legal code only reflects the Icelandic social injunction against public expressions of emotion. I discuss the cultural prohibition against open expressions of emotion elsewhere (Bardowell 14-26), but here it will suffice to present a few brief examples. In another Old Norse family saga, Egils saga Skallagrímssonar, the main character, Egill, is told by a close friend to be wary of displaying too much sorrow over his brother’s death: “nú þó at þú hafir fengit skaða mikinn um bróður þinn, þá er þat karlmannligt, at bera þat vel” (Even though you have suffered a great loss with your brother, the manly thing to do is to bear it well) (Egils saga 148). In medieval Icelandic culture, refusal to show emotion is associated with a manly bearing—an attitude that also has currency in Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards emotion. Beowulf, the hero of an Anglo-Saxon poem, echoes this cultural imperative when he counsels the Danish King Hrothgar to “Ne sorga, snotor guma. || selre bið æghwæm / þæt he his freond wrecce || þonne he fela murme” (Be not sorrowful, wise man. || Better be it for everyone / that he avenge his friend || than he mourn much) (Klaeber’s Beowulf 1384-1385). Despite the social stigma against such emotional expression, characters within the Old Norse sagas find these intense emotions difficult to suppress.

One framework of emotional expression relevant to the present analysis of Brennu-Njáls saga is that offered by Old English scholar Leslie Lockett. She observes that in Old English literature, the mind, which is located in the chest, is the seat of emotion (Lockett 43-55; Bardowell 22). The Anglo-Saxons conceived of this bodily space as subject to temperature changes that corresponded with an individual’s emotional state, and, depending on the intensity of these temperature changes, the mind may expand or contract, causing a physical swelling. Lockett calls this theory of emotion “the hydraulic model of the mind” (Lockett 49-53), and we see evidence of it in Old Norse literature as well. For instance, when the Old Norse hero Sigurðr must abandon his lover, Guðrún, the saga writer observes that “svá þrútnuðu hans sínur, at í sundr gengu brynjuhringar” (so swelled his sides that the rings of his byrnie broke asunder) (Völsunga saga 187). Egils saga contains a similar instance of physical swelling when it describes Egill’s reaction to his son’s death: “sógn manna, at hann þrútnaði svá, at kyrtilinn rifnaði af
honum ok svá hosurnar” (people say [Egill] became so swollen that his tunic and hose burst off his body) (Egils saga 244). Mental anguish coincides with physical distress in Old Norse literature as well as in Old English literature, and attention to these moments may shed light on how saga characters translate their emotions into actions.

Returning to Brennu-Njáls saga, Njáll’s death leads to emotional distress that also manifests itself in strikingly physical ways. When one of Njáll’s loyal friends, Þórhallr Ásgírmsson, learns of the burning, the saga describes his reaction in terms that blend the emotional with the physical: “hann þrútnaði allr ok blóðbogi stóð ór hvárritveggju hlustinni, ok varð eigi stöðvat, ok fell hann í óvit, ok þá stöðvaðisk. Eptir þat stóð hann upp ok kvað sér litilmannliga verða” ([Þórhallr] swelled all over and a gush of blood poured from both ears, and it did not stop, and he fell down, and then it stopped. After that he stood up and said that this had been unmanly) (Brennu-Njáls saga 344; ch. 132). As Þórhallr proceeds to seek satisfaction for this wrong, the saga presents readers with another moment of intense emotion that leads to violent action. This time, the violence takes place at the Alþingi—where fighting is strictly forbidden (Cook 352). Just before the saga comes to a close, Flosi and the burners are brought to trial for the murders of Njáll and his family. Because those prosecuting Flosi and his men fail to dismiss the appropriate number of judges for handing down a verdict, judgment in the case is rendered invalid on a technicality—a technicality allowed by the law. Flosi and his men go free to the outrage of those loyal to Njáll. Upon hearing this result, Þórhallr drives a spear into a boil on his own foot from which “blóðfossin fellr ok vágfǫllin, svá at lœkr fell eptir gólfinu” (a gush of blood and pus flowed like a stream along the floor)7 (Brennu-Njáls saga 402; ch. 145). He then marches to the site of what he perceives to be a terrible miscarriage of justice and, without a word, mounts an attack on Flosi’s men. This act instigates one of the largest battles in the entire saga. The emotion Þórhallr experiences is once again accompanied by a kind of swelling—the boil that festers on his foot.8 When he hears of Njáll’s death, Þórhallr involuntarily releases the pressure of this emotional swelling as he bleeds from his ears, and here he releases the pressure that builds in his body by intentionally lancing his own boil. In this instance, the saga depicts the release of pressure as a purgation of the fluids building within Þórhallr’s body and causing his ailment. In this very violent scene, we see the consequences of the law’s failure to account for intense emotional states in the sagas. Such a failure can sometimes serve as the cause for emotional outbursts that lead to further crimes and, potentially, outlawry. In this case, Þórhallr’s outburst leads him to violate the peaceful space of the Alþingi.

This emotional swelling makes following the pragmatic route to resolution almost unbearable for the one experiencing it. With respect to Brennu-Njáls saga’s main characters, the failure to act pragmatically is precisely what leads to Gunnar’s death and what sets the final climax, Njáll’s burning, in motion. Once Gunnar has received the sentence of lesser outlawry, he must leave Iceland, and Njáll offers him some parting words:
See to it, my friend, that you abide by this agreement . . . If your first journey abroad brought you great honour, this one will bring you even greater honour. You will return to Iceland as a man of great renown and will live to be an old man, and no one around here will dare to offer you an affront. But if you do not leave the country and so break the agreement, then you will be slain here in this land, and that will be sad news for all your friends! (Bayerschmidt and Hollander 144-45)

Gunnar agrees to go, but, as he rides out to his ship the following morning, he slips from his saddle and falls facing his farm against the backdrop of the Icelandic hillside. In an impulsive decision, Gunnar declares, “Fǫgr er hlíðin, svá at mér hefir hon aldri jafnfǫgr sýnzk, bleikir akrar ok slegin tún, ok mun ek riða heim aptr ok fara hvergi” (Beautiful is the hillside, it has never appeared to me as beautiful, with white meadows and mown fields, and I shall ride back home and fare nowhere) (Brenni-Njáls saga 182; ch. 75). The desire for vengeance does not fuel Gunnar’s decision but another, perhaps more powerful emotion: fear of loss and longing after beauty. In a decision that everyone, including himself, seems to recognize as his final undoing, Gunnar rides home and is shortly thereafter attacked and killed.

Perhaps in closing, it is fitting to return to the question I raised at first: is reconciliation truly possible in the Icelandic legal system if the emotions that arise within it are not addressed? Perhaps the most perplexing thing about Brennu-Njáls saga is the final example of reconciliation it offers in its closing pages. This particular reconciliation seems the least likely of all the foregoing attempts, and it happens between Njál’s son-in-law Kári and Flosi, the leader of Njál’s killers. Kári has been hunting down the men involved in Njál’s murder and killing them one by one, and the main culprit in Njál’s burning is Flosi. Despite the grounds for animosity between them, Kári, who has heard of Flosi’s generosity and hospitality, decides one day to put these virtues to the test. In the final chapter of the saga, Kári makes his way to Flosi’s house. The saga tells us that “Hann kenndi þegar Kára ok spratt upp í móti honum ok minntisk við hann ok setti hann í hásaeti hjá sér” ([Flosi] recognized Kári immediately and sprang up to meet him and kissed him, and he put him in the high seat beside him) (463; ch. 159). Flosi invites Kári to stay for the winter, and Kári accepts. We learn in the very next passage that the two men made “complete reconciliation” (heilum sáttum), and Flosi gives Kári his daughter’s hand in marriage, thereby cementing their reconciliation through the bond of kinship (463; ch. 159).

This scene has perplexed many scholars of the saga, and some postulate that their reconciliation is owing to a triumph of the Germanic ethic drengskapr,
which means “high-mindedness” or “nobility” (Beekman Taylor 179-80; Allen 92-93). But this explanation does not provide an answer for why reconciliation works here, between these men, when so many other noble Icelanders throughout the saga fail at it. This is an emotional display to be sure, but rather than resulting in self-destruction it produces harmony and solace. Perhaps it is significant that both Kári and Flosi have taken pilgrimages to Rome and have received absolution there (Brennu-Njáls saga 461-2; ch. 158), and it is tempting to attribute their reconciliation to the triumph of Christian morality over the Pagan, Germanic ethical system. William Ian Miller considers this conclusion and rejects it, noting that “peacemaking was not something that had to be learned from Christianity, despite rather facile observations to that effect in the scholarly literature” (276). Miller does, however, suggest that Christianity may have had a two-fold effect on conflict resolution in medieval Iceland. First, Christianity would have “created a class of people who, by profession, were to uphold the peacemaking cause” (267). Priests would have preached about the virtues of forgiveness, and they would have worked to bring about non-violent resolutions to offences that otherwise would have led to outlawry and violence. In the case of Kári and Flosi, however, no clergyman serves as an intermediary between them. Their “complete reconciliation” appears to be mutually desired. Miller’s second point is more applicable to their particular case. Christianity, Miller contends, “helped improve the status of arguments urging forbearance, and even forgiveness, as against the competing demands of heroic honor” (268). In other words, Christianity provided medieval Iceland with a rehabilitated view of forgiving one’s enemies without the need to exact vengeance or compensation. In fact, the very act of forgiveness itself could be sufficient to restore an individual’s damaged honor.

In this way, Miller suggests that Iceland’s new faith taught those involved in disputes that “practical advantages can accrue from conciliation” (270). If the medieval Icelanders did accept such a teaching, it may have been, at least in part, because it appealed both to the emotions and their pragmatic ethical code. In this respect, the Christian ethic of forgiveness perhaps succeeds where the law fails. Continued exposure to Christian thought has, if not completely changed these medieval Icelandic settlers, opened a way for them to reconcile their emotional experience with social order. Whatever the case, for the first time in Brennu-Njáls saga, we see a true reconciliation—a representation of harmony in which these two men, once bitter enemies, have found a way to satisfy both their emotional needs and their culture’s pragmatic demands.

Notes

1 In his introduction to the text, Einar Ól. Sveinsson reports that scholars believe the earliest manuscript containing Brennu-Njáls saga would have been written in the late thirteenth century (lxxv). He also places the birth of the first character mentioned in the saga at about 910 A.C.E. (lx).
Eleanor Rosamund Baraclough observes this equivalence between the law and Icelandic society when she notes, “Law . . . defines the theoretical margins of society for in medieval Norse society the social sphere was regarded as being synonymous with law” (366).

Brennu-Njáls saga is the Old Norse title often referred to simply as Njáls saga. The Old Norse title is translated “The Saga of Burnt Njál”—a title that foreshadows the main character’s demise at the hands of his enemies.

Peter Foote encourages confidence in this account, noting that Ari writes this passage “within ten years or so of the event” and that “we have no doubt of its accuracy” (6).

All Old Norse citations to Brennu-Njáls saga refer to the Íslenzk Fornrit edition of the text, edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson. All translations of Old Norse and Old English texts are my own unless otherwise noted.

It is worth noting that how the decision to convert to Christianity arises is a bit clearer in chapter 7 of Íslendingabók. In this version, two early converts to Christianity speak of the new faith at the Alþingi, which so polarizes those who adhere to the old faith that “sögðusk hvárir ýr lýgum víð aðra” (each side declared themselves to be not under the same law as the other) (Íslendingabók 16). The Christians try to appoint Siðu-Hallr as their own Lawspeaker, a decision that underscores the political divisiveness of the conversion. Siðu-Hallr somehow persuades the current Lawspeaker, Þorgeirr, to declare the Christian laws. In the end, Þorgeirr determines that the entire country will accept Christianity rather than be divided. How Siðu-Hallr arranges for Þorgeirr to side with the Christians is a mystery. The verb Ari Þorgilsson uses to denote the agreement the two men struck, at kaupa, is ambiguous. It ranges in meaning from “to bargain” to “to buy off” (An Icelandic-English Dictionary 333).

Einar Ól. Sveinsson glosses vágföl as “gröftur” (pus) (402, fn. 5). Cleasby and Vigfusson gloss the word as “the running of matter, from a sore” (684).

It is true that Þórhallr seems to have developed the boil prior to the verdict at the Alþingi, but certainly he experiences emotional strain prior to the judgment, which in this scene represents the eruption of tensions that have built well in advance of this particular incident.

Translation of this passage comes from Carl F. Bayerschmidt and Lee M. Hollander edition of Njál’s Saga.

“Complete reconciliation” is Bayerschmidt and Hollander’s rendering of heilum sáttum (355).
Allen refers to this idea as þegnskapr (93), but the meaning appears to be equivalent to drengskapr (An Icelandic-English Dictionary 105, 732).

Works Cited

Christian Axioms and Cultural Moral Practice: Strengthening Student Faith in Studying Njal’s Saga

Michael David Elam

Abstract

The Old Norse Njal’s Saga can help students of faith explore ideas of culturally sanctioned modes of justice connected not only to personal violence but also to other violations of social custom in the saga. These modes of justice include practices that might seem incompatible in a single culture’s views of how best to achieve peace and maintain societal order, although the saga tacitly presents a framework by which a reader may judge the efficacy of each mode with respect to bringing about long-lasting conflict-resolution and fostering longstanding peace. Njal’s Saga presents three primary modes of justice, each of which is generally acceptable within the Icelandic society; the modes can be labeled as blood-vengeance, private agreement, and brokered settlement. This article, then, draws from the author’s experience directing a student’s independent study of Old Norse literature, and from such experience explains how students of faith might recognize the varying degrees of ineffectiveness in each of these modes. From such recognition, one can help students with strong moral convictions, especially with regards to conflict resolution, see how the saga affirms the need to consider the varied consequences of different acts of justice. Doctrines concerning the insufficiency of retributive justice to maintain social stability and the need for divine intervention to maintain significant, lasting peace are underscored as well. Discussion of saga details is interspersed with discussions of the independent study’s observations and discussions. In addition, the article affirms the value for a student of faith to encounter the violence in the saga narrative in order to strengthen their doctrinal commitments.

In the spring semester of 2015, I directed an independent study of Old Norse Literature in Translation. During the course of the study, my student read a number of fornaldarsögur (i.e. sagas of ancient times) and Íslendingasögur (i.e. sagas of the Icelanders) focusing mainly on moral structures implicit and explicit in each. Although the student’s culminating project centered on the roles of women in these sögar, or sagas, her project also drew heavily on our discussions of moral conflicts within the various, and sometimes competing ethical paradigms of single cultural systems. That is, in a single culture, multiple norms governing ethical and moral behavior can operate simultaneously so that resolutions of conflict are not necessarily reached, especially when one party in a conflict uses one culturally authorized method of resolution (e.g. brokered settlement) while the other uses another (e.g. blood-vengeance). Such multiplicity, the student
recognized, does not guarantee that all acts of justice will be valued in the same way or will have stabilizing results. Sometimes acts of justice that incorporate violence, though such acts are sanctioned and acceptable, may perpetuate additional deeds of violence that lead to instability rather than peace. This might be seen, for example, in blood vengeance, the just and acceptable avenging of a killing by killing either the responsible person or a person associated with the guilty party, something within the bounds of morally acceptable response though not necessarily conducive to social harmony.

Still, as my student discovered, some texts may present other acceptable paradigms of justice available in the same culture, not merely as a fact of variety, but in order to advocate for one over others. A ransom, for example, may be paid to assuage a killing instead of killing another and be as acceptable as the blood-vengeance method of justice. With such disparate methods of justice, namely by either killing or offering a ransom, in a culture’s operative moral framework in mind, the study wondered if a chain of events in a single saga, a chain that included multiple ways of administering justice, could be used as part of a matrix to see whether one method might be favored over another, even if multiple ones were authorized in the context of the narrative. Moreover, because the study was undertaken by a Christian student in a Christian university, and because matters of moral practice are often an integral part of studying texts for such students, the study also sought evidence of the saga’s affirmation of Christian axioms, namely that human beings operate with a limited capacity to practice perfect justice. If the saga presented such an affirmation, even if it were implied more than overtly expressed, there might be devotional value for a student studying such works in additional to traditional academic value of developing one’s analysis skills.

Therefore, rather than taking the study as an opportunity to disparage the, often pre- or non-Christian, cultures portrayed in these works as backward or otherwise in need of having a Christian morality imposed on them, the study prompted the student to consider how such a reality, that is, the presence of simultaneously competing and authorized methods of exacting justice in a single culture (as presented in a single saga narrative), might affirm Christian tenets she held, particularly that such a reality is the nature of post-lapsarian culture. The point was neither to confirm nor condemn one practice of justice over another, nor to condemn the reality of competing forms of justice as a symptom of a kind of destructive relativism latent in a culture. Rather, one of the major points to be learned by the student is how literary works evince a Christian paradigm that observes such cultural disparity as a symptom of the need for redemptive engagement with Christ’s claims that humanity is lost without reconciliation to God and to his methods of justice as revealed in the teachings of Jesus.

This article, then, draws from that independent study and discusses how *Brennu-Njáls saga* (*Njal’s Saga*) lends itself particularly well to showing the veracity of Christian claims about the world and right conduct in it. In addition to reinforcing general practices of good pedagogy, it shows how not only to guide students through assessing the narrative implications of conflicts rising within ostensibly ethically unified cultural practices but also how to see devotional value in such intra-cultural ethical conflicts, which underscore Christian notions of
societal depravity. The goal, then, is to get students not to lament over such a state of affairs, but to see that such a state affirms some of Christianity’s axioms and to help them consider the reliability of Christianity’s other axioms.

First, however, it is necessary to explain why such an approach to reading is important to consider in the context of Christian higher-education pedagogy and to point out the Christian paradigm this study assumes. The operative Christian framework may be considered broadly North-American Evangelical, accepting the provisional characteristics defined by Mary M. Juzwik, particularly of a privileging of one’s relationship with Christ over particular denomination’s theological commitments (336). That is not to say that only such students will approach the saga, or any literature, the way this study does nor to say that only such students will appreciate the results of this study’s reading of saga texts. Instead it is to identify a reading concern held by certain students that often overlaps with such a paradigm of Christianity. Furthermore, the concern for finding moral rectitude in literature that matches one’s personal convictions about moral absolutes is not unusual in such students. In my experience, many, if not most, evangelical Christian students coming into a university are particularly sensitive to ways that narratives, among other things, reveal cultural values and how the portrayal of such values may influence them. The approach is generally concerned with, among other things, seeing how texts reveal the milieus that gave rise to them, such structures usually called “worldviews” among Christian students. Indeed, students’ reading of the Bible for, among other things, moral lessons and affirmations is the same mode by which they read much, if not all literature.¹

This method of reading texts often involves searching for ways a text might either explicitly or implicitly advocate or condemn behaviors it portrays and then comparing the results of such a search against what the reader believes the Bible to advocate or condemn. Referring to “Bible,” or using a word such as “biblical,” indicates a hermeneutic rooted in a student’s Christian tradition that privileges material in the Bible as the basis by which ultimate judgments about morality and other matters may be made. The comparing of search results from reading a text against the interpretive tradition from which the student comes, results in a student’s simultaneously evaluating the text’s overall moral value, namely its compatibility with the values of his or her interpretive tradition, and recognizing a lesson revealed in the comparison. Such a lesson may be advocated for by the text itself or discerned in the process of comparison and may be applicable to the reader, society, or some other part of culture. For example, a student from an evangelical tradition reading *Njal’s Saga* might compare its portrayals of violence to accounts of peaceful conduct advocated by Jesus or in other books of the Bible and conclude that the saga values violence incompatible with his or her faith. From the comparison the student would learn that one should perhaps avoid reading *Njal’s Saga* since it portrays, and maybe advocates for or even perpetuates, behavior incompatible with biblical teachings. Of course, such a reading is in danger of unfairly reducing the saga to a touchstone that either affirms or denies what the student believes to be moral, the text being disposable once the moral lesson is learned. And the method is overly simple,
even if it effectively reiterates what the student already finds valuable in his or her faith. Such a mode of reading, however, is often the primary way in which students with Christian backgrounds read texts.

Such a method, though, need not be a problem for getting a student to recognize the complex ways in which texts actually affirm his or her assumptions about the world in which he or she lives, reaffirming the text’s value for study even after a moral is discerned. The end of such an examination is for students to read critically in order to appreciate a text for what it offers without necessarily accepting what might be seen as its system of values. Students come away from such studies keenly aware of texts as affirmations of Christian axioms, not easily discarded but having evidential value, and are often interested in continuing such readings once they recognize their value. Of course, this is not the only method used by Christian readers of texts, nor is it always presented as the most important method. Nevertheless, it produces a kind of reading that can be valuable when encountering sagas and their preoccupations with matters of avenging wrongs, even if those preoccupations sometimes seem alien to a student’s received wisdom concerning moral absolutes and their portrayals in literature.

Returning to the matter of my student’s independent study, it is important to point out that this particular student felt more receptive to seeing value in Old Norse literature from a Christian perspective because of, not merely in spite of, the moral dilemmas their texts posed. Although the study included reading both the prose and poetic Eddas, as well as sagas of ancient times, the majority of the study’s moral investigations centered on Njal’s Saga, especially its feuds and sequences of retribution, all of which seem tacitly within the saga’s bounds of lawful actions.

Recognizing the moral dilemmas and acceptable responses to them posed throughout Njal’s Saga was and is not difficult, although our independent study also considered introductory material to help inform encounters with moral dilemmas in the text. Indeed, it is a good idea for professors to shape their students’ inquiries by what scholars may have said about a matter up to any given point. Students themselves may not know to contextualize their ideas according to what may have been said before concerning their inquiries, but a professor should help students see the value of doing so in order to familiarize students with the concept of larger scholarly discourse. Even in the case where there may be a dearth of scholarship (for instance in a particularly devotional reading of the saga), a student might see an opportunity to open a line of discussion in addition to contributing to existing ones. Students should not fear if either is the case, whether their ideas are fresh or if they reflect established views. In the case of Njal’s Saga, focus on the inability to achieve perfect justice within a culture’s authorized practices was not new, although scholarship affirms recognition of the topic’s importance. Indeed, Robert Cook’s edition of the saga devotes a section to matters of “Law,” and it helped ground our discussion of how different, and culturally authorized, modes of justice might help reveal one as superior even if not always followed, a reality that affirmed the student’s belief not only in preferable moral actions, but also in the difficulty individuals have in choosing a favorable action if it seems to undermine the justification of their position. That
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is, the belief in human inability to perform perfect justice was affirmed, along with a devotional application to seek justice through God.

Returning to the student’s reading of the saga in light of scholarship on the matter, her hunch about the struggle to find sufficient justice was affirmed by Cook, who writes, “More than any other family saga, Njal’s Saga is about law” (xxiii), after which he goes on to quote assertions of Njal to that end. He quotes, for example, Njal’s statements in the saga that the lack of law will undermine Icelandic society and that, in spite of how cumbersome lawful process may be, it is better than having no law at all, pointing out the topic of law being a major focus of the saga’s author (xxiii). And although the saga seems preoccupied with the minutiae of the law, as Cook points out (xxiii-xiv), the saga sets up various contexts in which justice is addressed beyond, or perhaps more correctly in addition to, Iceland’s formal legal court at the time, convened at the Althing. Students can use Cook’s identifications of potential conflict-resolution methods, themselves derived from the saga, to help consider how the saga implies which forms of justice produce results more favorable than others (xxiv-xxvii). Is it better to try to reach an arbitrated settlement, to prosecute the matter at the Althing, or to seek revenge, and how might the text tip its hand, so to speak, in favor of one of these options?

Cook’s introduction was not the only place my student could find a discussion of competing forms of justice in the saga. The matter is also discussed by Judith Jesch in “‘Good men’ and Peace in Njáls Saga.” In fact, Jesch’s analysis is particularly congenial to students looking for the privileging of Christian ideals in Njal’s Saga. Jesch, who also draws from the saga the three broad categories of justice available for the redressing of wrongs in Iceland, sees the saga as affirming the need for Christian conversion to reach lasting peace. First, however, it is important to recognize how the saga itself delineates possible forms of justice. In a passage where Hildigunn asks Flosi, her uncle, how he might help her find justice for Njal’s sons’ murdering of her husband, Hoskuld of Hvitanes, Flosi identifies two forms when he replies, “I will prosecute the case to the full extent of the law, or else make a settlement that good men see as bringing honor to us in every way,” to which Hildigunn adds a third option, “Hoskuld would have exacted blood-vengeance if it were his duty to take action for you” (194). Although Jesch’s discussion revolves around the term “good men,” she points out that there exist in Icelandic society multiple methods of justice that are simultaneously acceptable (67), even if their methods may not be exactly the same, but that none of them is satisfactory for ceasing strife. Indeed, Jesch offers what she calls a “matrix within which we can discover the moral and intellectual ideals” influencing the saga author, a matrix consisting of how the saga seems to define “good men” and how it presents different, culturally acceptable implementations of justice (68). Going over the saga with matters of Christianity in mind, then, produces readings by students that are similar to the ones Jesch brings up, ones that continually affirm the need for divine intervention for the establishing of societal peace.

In fact, the reading of Njal’s Saga with my student was undertaken without initially directing the student to external material by which to understand
the primary text. Certainly, our study used Cook’s introduction and notes, but often literary insights come without scholarship shaping a reading beforehand. Our initial discussions of the saga centered on matters such as the law’s inadequacy to bring peace, how the practice of justice perpetuates conflict if parties are not willing to let go of claims to redress wrongs, and how peacekeeping may come only when parties refuse to seek justified redress for wrongs. Identifying recurring patterns in the saga helped the student recognize that the saga seemed most interested in exploring a cycle of justice’s inability to establish and sustain peace, a cycle leading to the necessity of divine intervention, in this case through Christian conversion.

We talked about the establishing of some of these themes in the early chapters of the saga, in which Hrut marries Unn but is divorced from her after her father, Mord, helps her to do so. Hrut’s counter suit, if one can call it that, conflates the justice of settlement with that of physical force as he challenges Mord to a fight, a fight Mord cannot possibly win because of his age (17-18). The episode culminates in chapter eight, when, while Hrut and his brother, Hoskuld, are staying with Thjostolf at Lund, two boys act out a maudlin version of Hrut’s challenge to Mord. Hrut and Hoskuld react very differently: Hoskuld gets angry and strikes one of the boys in the face and cuts him, whereas Hrut calls the stricken boy over and gives him a ring. Both attempt to end the boy’s insulting behavior, but it is Hrut’s reaction that sets up the contrast of justice to pay attention to throughout the saga: only through the winning of goodwill can a settlement hold. The saga says, “Hrut took a gold ring from his finger and gave it to [the boy who called himself Mord] and said, ‘Go away, and don’t ever give offence again.’ The boy went away and said, ‘I shall always remember your decency.’ Hrut was spoken well of for this” (18).

The contrast between the brothers’ methods and their effectiveness is shown again later when Hrut arbitrates the dispute between Osvif and Hoskuld for Hallgerd’s inciting of Thjostolf to kill her husband, Thorvald. Students see two conflicting perspectives on justice renewed, both of which might be understood as reasonable: On one hand, as Hoskuld puts it, “I didn’t kill [Osvif’s] son, and I didn’t plan his death,” while on the other, as Hrut says, “We must forestall evil rumours and compensate [Osvif] for [Thorvald]” (25). The student sees that each answer is reasonable: Hoskuld is not responsible for Osvif’s death and shouldn’t be held accountable for it, although, from Hrut’s perspective, it would foster peace if compensation were paid even if one were innocent in the matter. Although one might argue that the resolution of the conflict, (Hrut’s advice wins out) rises in large part to save face in the eyes of the community and although Hoskuld in his denial still shows some sympathy for Osvif’s plight, the settlement clearly looks forward to the keeping of peace by assuaging the wronged party instead of insisting on an alternate view of justice that might rightly exonerate Hoskuld of personal responsibility. As Hrut realizes, a just perspective does not always maintain peace. The student sees in the episode a kind of humility, utilitarian to be sure, but nevertheless one that seeks peace as the useful end of paying compensation to a father even though one was not involved in the murder of his son.
From this episode, and after reading further into the saga, my student inferred that these two modes of justice, namely one of violently attempting to insist on justice and the other of trying to assuage hard feelings even as justice is insisted on, stand together to reveal that the more favorable mode is one which attempts to reconcile accuser and accused. Furthermore, Christian students may also recognize that the cessation of hostility requires a form of humility on the part of both parties, the relinquishing of claims to further justice. One of the earliest successful resolutions to conflict, in the rebuked boy’s statement “I shall always remember your decency” (18), implies such reconciliation. No rehashing of grievances is needed if both parties insist that the resolution is final.

Additionally, openness about potential conflict seems to be a factor in potentially avoiding further conflict in the saga, although the implication is that such openness should lead to refusal to put oneself in a compromising position. Indeed, when Glum seeks Hallgerd’s hand in marriage, Hrut asserts the best course of action when he counsels Hoskuld to be honest about Hallgerd’s poor marriage to Thorvald. Hoskuld follows his brother’s advice, and Hrut, though he implies Glum should not make the match, says as much about openness being the best course toward peace, or as he puts it, “Everything must be free of deceit” (28). Here students start to see that the imposition of the will may be one of the factors that reveals one mode of justice as favorable over another, even if each is sanctioned by society. The analogy is that just as Glum is free within the customs of Iceland to marry Hallgerd, though he ought not to marry her, so too is the imposition of will through violence within the bounds of acceptable redress, though only settlements and the dropping of disputes keep the peace. Still, the episode ends, as so many episodes in Njal’s Saga end, disastrously for those who ignore advice to avoid trouble. Ultimately Glum, like Thorvald, is killed by Thjostolf (except this time Hallgerd does not incite the killing), and Hrut finally kills Thjostolf, putting an end to the malice that stirs up so much trouble in the early chapters of the saga. Students will see, also, another instance of diverging paths of justice in the aftermath of the episode. On one hand, when Glum’s brother, Thorarin, comes seeking recompense for Thjostolf’s killing of Glum, Hoskuld echoes his earlier stance when Osvif sought recompense for his son and says, “I didn’t kill [Glum], and [Hallgerd] didn’t plan his death—and when Hrut found out about [Thjostolf’s killing Glum], he killed Thjostolf” (34). In this case, Hoskuld suggests that justice has been served by way of vengeance; no need for recompense remains. On the other hand, Hrut displays the kind of compassion for Thorarin that he showed to Osvif, saying, “Let’s make [Thorarin’s] trip honourable. He has surely had a great loss and it will be well spoken of if we give him gifts and he becomes our friend for life” (34). Though the legitimate serving of justice was carried out concerning the murder, Hrut sees the path of recompense and reconciliation to be a more stable one. He sees that honor is not limited to his vengeance on Thjostolf but extends to Thorarin’s seeking redress for a kinsman, and facilitating the fulfillment of such an honorable mission will build lasting peace. Here the Christian student finds the saga participating in the kind of virtue advocated by Christ, one that might be at odds with other forms of virtue also at work and sanctioned by the culture.
The early chapters of *Njal’s Saga*, about a tenth of the saga, set up broad matters of concern for the entire saga (although by no means the only ones). Those in the Gunnar/Njal episodes are more expansive than the Hoskuld/Hrut ones, and their threads more intricately woven, creating a complex view of legitimate modes of justice, while at the same time preserving favor for that of peacemaking, of dropping matters of vengeance and accepting to stop cycles of violence. Such themes include the need for peaceably reached agreements to withstand violent assaults, the need for humility and grace in the face of rehashed grievances, and the need to consider whether or not peace can be maintained at all. Our independent study, for example, talked about legal formulas used in confessing and prosecuting the killing of a person but mainly focused on how the saga implies that even settlements or brokered agreements, though preferable to blood vengeance, are frail in societies where multiple modes of justice exist. In fact, at one point, the student wondered if the saga suggested that peace in society is not an achievable goal.

In this light, Christian students reading the saga might discuss ways in which *Njal’s Saga* underscores broader problems of justice in society and a fallen world, a world beyond the narrative scope, but one which nevertheless evinces many of the traits in it. Often Christian students approach such dilemmas with the idea that the application of an ideal moral formula can solve the dilemma in actuality. For example, a student may think that if the principals involved in a killing, such as one found in the saga, would only agree to a solution and then let bygones be bygones, as it were, there is no reason to think that the end of the problem should not be reached. Only if someone refuses the ideal solution, then, will conflicts and, in the case of the sagas, feuds perpetuate themselves. Another student, also appealing to the imposition of an ideal as the formula by which practicable solutions are reached, may, on the other hand, see the administration of *lex talionis* as the ideal by which solutions inevitably ought to reach their conclusions. When, for instance, a wronged person exacts similar penalties from a guilty party, as in the case when a murder is answered by killing the murderer, justice will have been served, and any additional conflict is to ignore or not recognize such a fact. The problem with such a formulation, whether erring on the side of settlement or vengeance, is that the variable of desire cannot be counted on when attempting to resolve conflict. What if, for example, one accepts payment but later realizes such payment is not enough to assuage the wrongness of a crime (as when the cloak is presented), or if the life-for-a-life penalty appears excessive and not fit the crime? Desire, then, for a new, or at least corrected, penalty will seem a reasonable course. I say reasonable, but the course is in fact based more in desire than in reason. The correction will be more desirable. That is not to say that reason plays no role in such a view. In fact, the intellectual assent to the need for correction will likely be the drive behind the desire. But what if one desires something different, something that has a better chance to reach peace instead of perpetuate conflict? Here the Christian student may find that the teachings of Jesus, which often refocus individuals on matters of desiring God over justice, provide a model by which to explore the possibility that justice may be served in ways that concentrate more on peace than on conflict.
In the case of *Njal’s Saga*, for example, one might point out ways in which the law cannot make individuals good. My student, for instance, recognized an overarching theme of justice’s inadequacy to thwart violence sustained throughout the entirety of *Njal’s Saga*, even though it may satisfy the law’s requirements, and the matter of Christ’s teachings concerning meekness and peacekeeping came up more than once. Comparing the saga’s actions to such teachings can prove fruitful for helping students strengthen faith by seeing those teachings affirmed and help students realize the possibility that they too can participate in a nearer relationship to God by seeing the predicaments *Njal’s Saga* presents. For instance, among the most obvious of Jesus’s teachings are his commands to turn the other cheek when stricken, to go an extra mile when compelled by force to travel a single mile, and to be kind to those who persecute and ill-use one; Jesus asserts that there is great reward in doing such things. The saga seems to affirm that this is indeed a more favorable course of action than returning a blow for a blow or resisting a forced march. After all, the eye-for-eye/tooth-for-tooth practice of justice, *lex talionis*, though sanctioned in Icelandic society in the saga (and in the Old Testament as well), does not yield peace; rather it tends toward perpetuation and escalation of conflict.

Another of Jesus’s teachings may be juxtaposed with actions of justice in *Njal’s Saga*, namely Christ’s assertion that one of the two greatest commandments is to love one’s neighbor as oneself. In the same way that people desire to be preserved and to benefit from those around them, so too should one preserve one’s neighbor for the sake of that neighbor. The situation between Njal and Gunnar is perhaps the closest example of examining the command, and suggests that when individuals seek justice in such a way that friendships are preserved (with no insistence on imposing one’s will over another’s or trying to absolve oneself of responsibility for deeds that threaten to destabilize neighborly relationships), neighborly love of the kind Jesus commands produces results more in keeping with Christian values. Certainly, forces work to undermine the neighborly love between Gunnar and Njal, but that only serves to reinforce the need for divine strength to withstand such forces. One must draw near to God if one wants to find freedom from conflict (even freedom from the pursuit of justice) and promote societal peace and unity.

At this point, some professors, and I might count myself among them at times, will feel significant discomfort in leading this kind of devotional or meditative reading of the saga. Such readings move away from the literary analysis that is so important in academic study and beyond it. Such discomfort should not be discounted, but neither should the value of the reflection on personal beliefs literature provokes in nearly everyone, students or otherwise. Such self-reflection requires the kind of critical thinking and scrutiny academic study endorses. There is a reciprocal worth, then, in allowing texts to lead us into close scrutiny of axioms often rehearsed without thinking. Often students repeat statements from the Bible not only axiomatically, but also uncritically, in many cases not understanding the implications of such axioms and hoping for mere agreement with a general system of belief more than exploration of claims implied in axioms. One may say that one should only meditate on things of good
report, implying that reading and meditating are the same thing, but what is one to do with the quantities of stories in the Bible that present gross indecencies with little or no moral pronouncement on such behavior? Surely if the morally repugnant material in Bible narratives is valuable for reading, so too is the morally complex material of the sagas. In the case of *Njal’s Saga*, then, students will be challenged by the implication that though peaceable agreements are better, as implied by the saga itself, such agreements are tenuous and subject to the individuals’ desire to abide by them, and that in order to abide by any agreement to peace, an individual must yield to God.

As mentioned earlier, this view of the necessity for divine empowerment in the keeping of peace finds affirmation, as Jesch points out, in *Njal’s Saga* itself. The pivotal moment of change in the saga, the point when cycles of violence in pursuit of justice are broken, is when Flosi and Kari make pilgrimages to Rome and are then reconciled to each other. Flosi’s conversion is more significant because of his role in burning Kari’s father-in-law, Njal, but both men are subject to the perpetual slaughter the saga enacts all the way through its narrative. Both, then, seem to need the change of conversion to thwart this cycle, something Jesch focuses on as a key to understanding the importance of good men brokering settlements in the saga (74-75). Although not the only way to understand the saga at this point, one might see the two opponents’ going to Rome and being absolved of sin as analogous to the absolution one must seek from God to pursue peace and drop the insistence of certain forms of justice that do not tend toward peace. Certainly the saga is more complicated than such a reading suggests, especially with Kari’s exacting justice from the burners, whom Flosi led and who are responsible for the deaths of Njal and those in his house, the burning from which Kari alone escaped. But the complications, again, reinforce Christian belief in the need for supernatural aid from God in order to practice justice leading to peace, even to forgo certain perspectives on justice in the interest of peace.

Such an approach to reading the saga, namely one that underscores affirmation of faith and nearness to God in the individual reader, is not likely to produce large numbers of traditionally academic insights; its focus on spiritual matters with respect to individual students lends itself to other kinds of results. Still, developing students’ spiritual wellbeing is as good a result as helping a student analyze literary, historical, and other matters usually associated with university-level study—some might argue that it is more so. Nevertheless, as said earlier, looking into matters of Christian faith requires skill similar to that of closely reading texts and of connecting those readings to matters of general concern in a humanities education. Cataloging ways justice is administered and the results of each instance of administration serves to show students implicit values advocated by texts. Indeed, saga literature demands a kind of attention other writing types often do not, and that attention to detail is commonly fostered in the study of the humanities. Indeed, Christian students throughout their early educations sow the seeds of such skills through activities such as formal catechesis and devotional readings of the Bible at home. Christian students learn that in some cases judgment of worldviews is not enough to draw one nearer to God, for, as in the sagas, justified criticism does not always translate into
besserung one’s own society. They learn that the flawed nature of humanity is observable in and affirmed by texts like the sagas, and in recognizing that such is the case, can draw nearer to God to find comfort, receiving help that leads to peace, potentially like the peace obtained when saga characters are absolved of their sins and yield to the teachings of God.

Notes

1 Much material related to such practices has been written. Mary M. Juzwik, for example, in “American Evangelical Biblicism as Literate Practice: A Critical Review,” though she focuses on the practice of reading the Bible itself, implies that the practice of Bible reading, often central to practicing one’s Christian faith, may powerfully influence readings of other texts as well. Additionally, Christopher Cobb’s concluding section to “Seeing ‘That of God’ in Texts: Christian Practices for Training in Perception” wonders how violence experienced by the religiously committed and their forgiveness of such violence could inform readings of Shakespeare (249-50, 251 n.6). Likewise, Susan V. Gallagher and Roger Lundin underscore the practice of reading literature with an eye toward its benefit to cultivating faith (though theirs is a study aimed more toward university students than the general reader). Other examples abound, and it would be impossible to catalogue them here, but the aforementioned works point to such materials.

2 Njal’s Saga was likely written in its current prose form in the last quarter of the thirteenth century (Cook ix) about events taking place in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries (viii-ix), although the legal context of the narrative seems to be roughly contemporaneous with its later composition instead of its historical subject (xxiii-xxiv).

3 Although a side issue, I believe it is worth briefly addressing anxieties about originality in the products of studying literature. Perhaps this is not as important to undergraduates that may not have graduate studies in mind, but there can be academic pressure on students to produce readings, analyses, etc. that bear marks of novelty of adding something innovative to scholarly discussion. Although I do not disagree that scholarly conversations should advance rather than repeatedly rehearse the same ideas, it may be valuable for students to see when their ideas, independently drawn without the aid of research, parallel those of scholars in the field. Indeed, this initial step can lead to the more fruitful, advancing scholarship and research characterized by innovation and typical of advanced study. Perhaps, as well, teachers can find reassurance of the soundness of their pedagogical practices when their students produce readings that harmonize with existing scholarship. I have found such reassurance myself and, along with my students, have been heartened by it.
4 The details can be difficult to follow, but in short this is what happened: Hoskuld’s daughter, Hallgerd, is betrothed to Osvif’s son, Thorvald. After their marriage, a dispute between Thorvald and Hallgerd arises, in which Thorvald strikes Hallgerd. While Thorvald is away, Hallgerd incites Thjostolf, who fostered her, to go and kill him. Osvif, Thorvald’s father, seeks to avenge his son, but is thwarted; and so he goes to Hoskuld, with whom Hallgerd is now staying, for compensation.

5 Many universities, whether Christian or not, value such reflection in learning, although the practice of such reading may be more inferred in formal teaching. I do not suggest that such a situation evinces hypocrisy, because I am not sure that such a reality is overt or intended. I only suggest that if such claims are made, professors should feel comfortable exploring the education of students’ moral and emotional capacities as well as their intellectual and rational ones. The results may test whether claims to value holistic education are as valued as institutions claim, but until overt attempts are made by professors, one may never know for certain.

Works Cited


Viking Literature and Christianity: A Place-as-Text Approach

Jonathan B. Himes

Abstract

The contrasts with Christianity in a Nordic worldview based on retaliation are obvious, but its emphasis on the covenantal bond between a chieftain and his hearth companions is still good for Christians to know about. In the summer of 2009, I led a group of students on a study tour of England and Scandinavia as the culmination of the course “Myths & Epics of Northwestern Europe.” It seems appropriate to try to bridge the gap for today’s readers by supplying archaeological data and geographical descriptions for places traveled by these heroes, since those raids and voyages loom so large in sagas and poems. Through the efforts of devout churchmen in the first millennium as well as secular scholars in our own, God has called our attention to a pagan mythology once held dear by Vikings and Anglo-Saxon chieftains of the Dark Ages.

In the year 991, an Ealdorman of Essex named Byrhtnoth rallied his troops to defend their coast against a force of Viking raiders who threatened extortion. Byrhtnoth refused their offer to be bought off with silver. Instead, he shouts in The Battle of Maldon, the poem that commemorates this fateful event, “Gehyrst þu, sælida, hwæt þis folc segeð? / Hi willað eow to gafole garas syllan” (l. 45-46) [Do you hear, Sailor, what this folk sayeth? They will give you spears for tribute].

In a spirit of what the Old English poem calls ofermod, interpreted by Tolkien as the prideful prerogative of the nobility (21-23), Byrhtnoth allowed those pirates to cross a land bridge after the tide had gone down so as to wage a fair fight, and he rode up and down the line of his own troops, much like Theoden in Lord of the Rings, encouraging his men to stand firm in the shield wall. In the ensuing melee, this brave, magnanimous leader succumbed to a fatal blow (several, actually) and his war-gear was snatched up by one of his own Essex thanes, who fled the field of battle on horseback. His cowardly retreat misled the other retainers into thinking their leader had given flight, but one warrior knew the truth and once again rallied the troops. His words are inspiring in much the same way that Texans are inspired by the story of the Alamo. That warrior expressed the heroic code of the northern medieval world with these words:

Hige sceal þe heardra,  heorte þe cenre,
mod sceal þe mare,  þe ure mægen lytlað. (l. 312-13)

Head must be harder, heart the keener,
Mood must be magnified, even as our might diminishs.

In my “C.S. Lewis & Inklings” class, I always explain how Ragnarok, the Nordic conception of the End Times, and the fatalistic worldview reflected in it differ from logical positivism or the modern myth of progress. What do these northern medieval traditions have in common? They reflect warrior ethics born from the Norse myth of regression, a grim code of courage which informed the literary tradition held so dear by both Lewis and Tolkien. The heroes face insurmountable odds, yet they go down fighting with all their might. They face the “long defeat” that Tolkien identified as an attitude appropriate even for Christians in facing earthly turmoil (Letters 255). For instance, even in the world of letters, the Inklings were aware that they would probably lose the battle over what constitutes “serious” literature. In this regard, Lewis wrote, “We shall probably fail, but let us go down fighting for the right side” (Carpenter 218). These words express the Inklings’ acknowledgement that they felt bound to preserve the literary traditions—both Northern and Christian—that had nurtured their imaginations, even if they must resort to promoting that legacy in popular modes of fiction instead of catering to the tastes of the literary elite. As a result of their talent in the genres of sci-fi and fantasy, they are some of the most widely-read authors of their generation who deal with the nature of violence and evil and yet provide meaningful answers.

In core curriculum classes such as “Masterpieces of Literature,” I frame the entire semester in terms of this value of studying the pagan classics. For one thing, it illustrates how God paved the way for the Gospel by sending good dreams and mythic visions to tribes around the globe. These pagan traditions may only “see through a glass darkly,” but as G. K. Chesterton argues in The Everlasting Man, some paganisms are better than others (150), and God even uses some of their teachings to chasten or educate His people as our theology about Him unfolds throughout history. The contrasts with Christianity in a Nordic worldview based on retaliation are obvious, but its emphases on the covenantal bond between a lord and his thanes, between a warrior’s oath before battle and his deeds, between gold armbands or heirloom swords and one’s worthiness to bear them—these are all ethical standards that are still good for Christians to know about.

In the fall semester of 2008, I taught a course entitled “Myths & Epics of Northwestern Europe” whose readings included Norse myths from the Edda concerning Odin, Thor, Loki, Ragnarok; the heroic saga Sigurd and the Volsungs; the Old Norse family saga of Njal; the eerie and fantastic adventures of the Viking maiden in Hervor’s Saga, as well as the Finnish folklore-epic Kalevala. The class was populated mostly by female students, and so one area of focus was the unexpected roles played by women in these texts otherwise dominated by men. In Hervor’s Saga, we observed the ways that Viking women were expected to behave as wives in charge of the family fortune and as skilled seamstresses, in contrast to this heroine who grows up an unruly foster-child slaying unsuspecting travelers in the forest, later retrieving her father’s sword from a burial mound in the famous “Waking of Angantyr” poetic episode, then becoming the leader of
Viking marauders. In the final sequence of the saga, Hervor’s grand-daughter bears both her name and the same heroic spirit in an ancient poem, “The Battle of the Goths and Huns” which takes the reader through a time-warp from the Viking Age back to the fifth century.

I challenged my students to imagine what audiences in the fourteenth century would have thought of a woman laying hold of the Viking culture’s symbol of the male prerogative—the sword—not merely holding it for her later progeny to pass down the family line, but wielding it herself to behead other men and emasculate them further by passing herself off as a Viking chieftain. It is as an outlaw that Hervor dons the garb and gear of a man, yet the saga writer seems to admire the shield-maiden’s pluck, if not also to revel in her throwing down of the gauntlet to the men around her. Outlaw she may be, but she is an outlaw in the tradition of other subversive heroes such as Grettir (of Grettir’s Saga), not outright villains like Guthrun (of Saga of the Völsungs). When she tires of masquerading as a man and roving as a pirate with great success, Hervor settles down to embroidery and appears to embrace her culture’s definition of a proper girl.

In Hervor’s Saga we have a tale about a warrior maiden who is both fair and fey, whose quest for the ancestral sword in the barrows is also a soul-searching mission, as she strives to understand her own violent tendencies, her gender troubles, her identity and place in the world. Since Viking women ordinarily did not take part in warfare, this heroine’s exploits are clearly the stuff of fantasy, all the more because of her unexpected about-face. The ending seems tacked-on, as if a compiler had imposed his male desire to domesticate the ferocious courage of a female tomb-raider. This story is instructive of how women in that time and place, though they held certain rights like the choice to divorce a do-nothing husband and to manage the household goods, still depended on the reputations of their husbands or the prominent men in their families, and so Hervor, being brought up in a foster-home, must tap into her true patriarchal line and claim it for her own, even taking on the violent mantle of those forebears, braving the underworld and a life of piracy, before she can feel comfortable occupying a sphere that is traditionally feminine.

Later in that course, we contrasted Hervor’s role with that of the wives in Njal’s Saga, in which many violent killings are traceable to the bickering of Bergthora (Njal’s wife) and Hallgerd (Gunnar’s wife) through the initial squabble over who gets to sit in high places. Hallgerd, who is involved in at least three of the seven major feuds throughout this saga (Lönnroth 76-77), plays a crucial role of instigator by ordering the murder of her rival’s slaves, by ordering her slave to steal from a stingy neighbor, or by mercilessly taunting the sons of Njal once she has taken a new lover. Though not as overtly transgressive as Hervor, Hallgerd manages to wreak havoc while operating within the societal strictures. In a culture dominated by male violence, even one in which women enjoyed some surprising levels of agency, we can see how challenging it continues to be for women to feel validated and secure in their identities.

Njal’s Saga transpires in the era of Harald Fairhair’s grandsons (late 900s), when Iceland was settled, the sagas claim, by people fleeing the
overlordship of Harald and the cruelty of Norse vikings. Icelanders, however, established a democratic life (parliament called the Althing) and had no slavery, finally adopting the Christian faith around AD 1000. This saga reveals, however, that even the Icelander’s own institutions for social order such as the godord, “chieftaincies,” were prone to corruption, and how conflicted they were as recent converts, never fully abandoning their admiration for heroes who rely on the sword to settle disputes. For instance, Skarphedin, son of Njal, is introduced as a phlegmatic, grim, trollish and enigmatic character with some of the best put-downs and some of the best action sequences in the saga. In one scene he jumps across a river and lands on an ice floe, and while sliding from one end to the other delivers a blow with his axe dubbed “Battle-Troll” that splits his enemy Thrain’s head “right down to the jaw, so that his jaw teeth dropped out on the ice. This happened so quickly that no one could strike a blow at Skarphedin, and he continued to glide along on the ice sheet at great speed” (188). Basically, this squinty-eyed, sallow-complexioned Clint Eastwood type of viking becomes increasingly interesting, even quite heroic, as he defends his father’s home even as the burning timbers crash down around him, giving his brother-in-law Kari a chance to escape, thus sacrificing himself in the process (255-59).

Tom Shippey points out that Iceland “ought to have been a Utopia. It had: no foreign policy, no defense forces, no king, no lords, no peasants, no dispossessed aborigines, no battles (till late on), no dangerous animals, and no very clear taxes. What, given this blank slate, could possibly go wrong? Why is their literature all about killing each other?” (qtd. in Overing and Osborn 51). The answer involves the age-old human problems of greed and pride: Viking sagas largely concern feuds about owning the land, farmers disputing property boundaries or possessions. So what kind of property were these people fighting over? Through closer inspection with ancillary reading materials and research, or even experiential learning through study abroad, it becomes far easier to understand character motivations, like Gunnar’s decision in Njal’s Saga to remain in Iceland, even as an outlaw, rather than leave behind the rugged beauty of his homeland.

In the summer of 2009, I led a group of students on a study tour of England and Scandinavia as the culmination of the course described above, “Myths & Epics of Northwestern Europe.” At the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen, we were able to view up close the pattern-welded swords, mail-coats, intricate gold-filigreed neck rings, arm bands, and other elaborate treasures, even chess pieces—artifacts we read about in so many texts. In some displays we tried on medieval garb and handled some replicas of weaponry and farming implements. By visiting the Viking fortress of Trelleborg in Sweden, we walked the walls of a (reconstructed) fortified training ground and stronghold for warriors. On board a replica of a Viking ship called the Roar Ege, my students and I rowed around the fjords surrounding Roskilde, the area traditionally associated with Hrothgar’s court, Heorot, in Beowulf (see image).
It certainly seems appropriate to try to bridge the gap for today’s readers by supplying archaeological data of the material culture mentioned in the poem and geographical descriptions for places traveled by these heroes, since those raids and voyages loom so largely in the thematic foci of the text. Doing so enables today’s readers to build up the cultural competence evoked by the text, and take steps toward becoming the Model Reader that its pages assume through the dense allusions to the legendary Germanic past and its sweep of famous chieftains, villains, hereditary swords, blood feuds, mead-hall rituals, peace-weaving alliances, elaborate ship burials, and so on. Knowing how these artifacts would resonate with audiences of the *Beowulf* poem, for instance, in the reign of Aethelstan helps today’s reader to understand why the poet includes certain “digressions” and shapes the material by interspersing foregrounded monster fights with legendary “back stories” of heroes from the more remote days of Sigemund and Heremod, or more recent exploits like Hygelac’s disastrous raid in Frisia, or his earlier victory in the Swedish wars with Ongentheow. But knowing what the artifacts are in the first place and what kind of places and environments they belong to (mead halls, barrows, headlands with coast guards, craggy moorlands) helps the reader to understand the immediate meaning of foregrounded details on the page. This knowledge also helps the reader imaginatively to enter into the “delightful” aspects through which the text gets its work done, the kind of work that allowed tenth-century audiences to learn important lessons about heritage.

For example, Overing and Osborn’s book *Landscape of Desire*, which documents the seafaring journey during which *Beowulf* crossed over to assist the Danes, can help twenty-first century readers to better imagine the hardness, the remote “northern-ness” of the expanses between coasts, no matter which shores the poet actually had in mind; if he left it poetically ambiguous, so much the better for us to be acquainted with the general “neighborhood” of those countries and their inlets. For instance, Osborn notes how there are indeed prominent headlands and cliffs around Denmark and its islands, in keeping with the poet’s...
descriptions, though scholars have treated this as poetic embellishment for a relatively flat area (6).

Overing raises an important question in place-as-text studies: why does it matter to be “in the very place” where a literary story was set? What does it mean to believe you are standing in the spot where a fictional character lived? “What is the nature of a place?” she asks, especially if you imagine yourself to be sharing it with the writer or audience of an ancient text (63-64). I would argue that these things are irretrievable, because the land itself constantly shifts, erodes, and is never the same today as it was yesterday, last season, or ten years ago—rivers get redirected, bluffs may shed layers of rock, piers disappear, and so on. But when we turn to the landscape of a text, we encounter a geographical approximation, the lay of the land, so that we have a rough idea of what environs the poet may have shared with the audience. There was enough traffic of traders between England and Scandinavia that even if the poet or the readers of Beowulf never traveled to those Northern coasts in person, the approximate descriptions would have been close enough to the cultural mappings they were already competent with to let them see (in the mind’s eye) or sense the “Northern-ness” of harsh and remote sea-cliffs and headlands where barrows like Beowulf’s might have been.

Osborn explains that European audiences of Arthurian tales, or Norwegian readers of sagas, have a different reading experience from that of Americans, since they live closer to the environs described as Wales or Drangey (90-92). Osborn shows here the value of the place-as-text approach: it can help American readers, for example, to build up a better cultural competence for such places or foregrounded actions (navigating, building ships or barrows, participating in mead-hall rituals). In this way, we can more easily distinguish them from—or appreciate their differences from—the more fanciful elements in such tales, as most of the narrative material, being medieval, is so alien to Americans or twenty-first century readers anyway. Overing and Osborn’s essays indirectly make a good apologia for study abroad trips for literature courses, but also in a more general way they explain the value of maps, genealogies, color inserts of grave goods, and the like for editions of medieval literature: they help readers to orient themselves in the spaces and artifacts of the textual world—to immerse themselves in it.

For the past ten years, I have imported some aspects of teaching literature in a place-as-text format to our First-Year Composition course, which traditionally at John Brown University has had a focus on Ozarks (sub)cultures (Thomas 32, 37), including Native-American. I strive to make this class for my freshmen similar to a study abroad course, insofar as we attempt to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar (Alice Reich, qtd. in Kutsche 5), and incorporate field trips and experiential learning into two of the major research-based essays of the semester. For this work my students focus on the shifting demographics of small-town Ozarks hill country, and neighboring regions along the border with Oklahoma, and the effects that tourism and increased outdoor recreation have had on the (sub)cultures of this region. They also consider how the indigenous Native American tribes, and then impoverished white populations
who supplanted them, have all in turn been displaced in later generations, leading to questions about the vestiges of the authentic culture in these places.

Recently I have added the Viking Runestone Festival in Heavener, Oklahoma, to our itinerary, which surprisingly incorporates both White and Amerindian cultures due to the peculiar history of the “runestone” supposedly inscribed by Vikings there in a region inhabited for centuries by Indians of the Spiro culture. According to Gloria Farley’s mammoth book *In Plain Sight*, which documents nearly every inscribed rock in Oklahoma and Arkansas (she leaves no stone unturned; pardon the pun), the Heavener Runestone was first called “Indian Rock” by locals who did not recognize the Norse runic symbols on the gargantuan slab that lay in a secluded gorge on the mountain overlooking their town. But the very fact that someone chose to carve runes here instead of painting Indian pictograms (such as can be found in Petit Jean, Arkansas), and the fact that the state of Oklahoma endorsed this site as a state park preserving authentic Viking exploration, suggests a desire of white-settler descendants to efface the original history of Indian Territories in the U.S. Today there is a festival once or twice a year—one in fall and one in spring—at this park where Viking culture is re-created in a variety of ways. Re-enactors wear the garb of Nordic villagers at booths strewn up and down the slopes. There is a large blacksmithy, a small farm with sheep, Norwegian horses, weavers, artisans, jewelers, geologists, cooks, and, of course, Viking warriors who perform *hólmganga* duels and other forms of traditional fighting.

Visiting shrines like the Heavener Runestone challenges students to think through how one might celebrate a particular heritage without diminishing, displacing, or destroying other rich ethnic traditions like the Amerindian Spiro mound building people of eastern Oklahoma. On that same field trip, I took my students in the afternoon from Heavener to the Spiro Mounds Archaeological Center, where we explored the culture of Caddoan-speaking Native Americans whose ancient capitol here along the Arkansas River featured at least twelve imposing mounds for leaders and their elite families up until about AD 1450 (Peterson). Much about this early American culture remains an enigma, but examining the carvings in stone or copper excavated in the area reveals that these people were as powerful and industrious in their day as the mound-building chieftains whose treasures were interred in the hillsides of Uppsala, Sweden. One difference for the Spiro people is that their extensive trade network was exclusively by foot or by canoe, in an epoch of American history without horses or other means of transportation.

Another case study for this class is a modern backwoodsman whose exploits are epic: Smokey Crabtree, from Fouke, Arkansas (in the southwest corner near Texarkana), wrote gripping memoirs of boar hunting and stalking the “Fouke Monster,” a bigfoot creature, thereby attaining international acclaim. The swampy islands and thickets haunted by massive four- and five-hundred pound blue boar and other prey related in his books offer modern counterparts to the archetypal boar and monster hunts in medieval poems such as the Middle English *Sir Gawain* poem, the Welsh *Culhwuch and Olwen* legend, and even the Old English *Beowulf* epic. In my classroom, students compare Smokey’s daring
Jonathan B. Himes

Jonathan Himes crawls through Arkansas creek bottoms with medieval classics in which the heroes penetrate the lairs of similar beasts to reveal how hunting for wild boar or giant trolls is a powerful archetype that persists across the centuries and the continents.

My research on medieval epics and Viking sagas feeds directly into my teaching of courses like “Medieval Literature,” “World Literature 1,” and “Masterpieces,” as well as the “C. S. Lewis & Inklings course.” In Medieval Literature, questions arise such as, “Why did Christian scribes preserve so much unedifying material?” I explain that writers do not endorse every objectionable view in their works, though their narrators may challenge or refine our Christian thinking.

In the case of Northern medieval poems of pagan heroism like Beowulf, the Christian scribe may be trying to salvage what was heroic and admirable in a worldview of endless blood feuds, a way of life that was noble yet doomed. Through the efforts of devout churchmen in the first millennium as well as secular scholars in our own, God has called our attention to a pagan mythology once held dear by the Anglo-Saxon warrior aristocracy: Even if the tide of war has turned against you—never flee the field of battle. Hold on with all your diminishing strength, and know that you have fought valiantly for the right cause. We must take risks. We must do the right things, following where the textual evidence leads and where our gifts lie, regardless of the outcomes. And we know even better than our pagan forebears that this “good death” is not all that there is. We have even more reason to keep on fighting.

Tolkien refers to “the lifting of the heart” or the poignant, piercing “Joy” to be found in such epics, whether in the case of a triumphant rout such as Hygelac’s defeat of Ongenteow at Ravenswood, where his fellow Danes had been cornered by the Swedes, or in the heroic stand of Byrhtnoth and his Essex thanes at Maldon, even when overcome by vikings:

It is the mark of a good fairy-story, of the higher or more complete kind, that however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to child or man that hears it, when the “turn” comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art [...] (Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” 68-69)

Studying the untamed Viking tradition in our college courses can be instructive in the ways that God teaches his people many worthwhile truths as we sift the imperfect, fractured Light within such traditions. There is not only admonitory value in these violent narratives, but also moments of rare, severe beauty to be experienced as we read about heroes and heroines of the North who pressed on, refusing to give up, even in the harshest of climates or the most rugged terrain while facing the most formidable odds.
Notes

1 My translations, unless otherwise noted.

2 This idea was brought to my attention during a session of papers over which Edwin Duncan was moderator at a conference of the Texas Medieval Association, University of St. Thomas, Houston, October 2002.

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Reviewed by Dennis Pruitt

Nick Spencer, Research Director at the Christian think tank Theos, reverses Tertullian’s question of what Athens has to do with Jerusalem and provides a convincing answer that the Church has had a significant influence on the development of Western values. The purpose of *The Evolution of the West* is to open our eyes to the important role Christianity has played in intellectual history. The book allows us to see how “Christianity has provided the ground beneath our feet for centuries” (183) to “draw out some of the ways that our Christian past is sedimented in our increasingly amnesiac present,” (9) and to “hear the past in its own key” (4). It is not a one-sided argument; Spencer does not hesitate to identify the failures of the Church in shaping values we take for granted today. In fact, he often uses the word “chequered” to describe the relationship of Christians to such institutions as democracy, science, law, humanism, and welfare.

Spencer has two key strengths as an author: his ability to interpret history by carefully weighing all sides and his clear desire to educate the reader without pushing an agenda. He wants to engage in a conversation with believers and nonbelievers alike, not merely to prove a point. He is concerned that historians and Christians suffer from historical amnesia, and he fears that removing Christianity from our accounts of history “will make it easier to airbrush Christianity out of our present and future” (47).

The book is structured as a collection of essays, lectures, and reviews, and, with some exceptions, this approach works well. The result is a text that has an integrated message. There are a few repetitive paragraphs, the chapter on inequality does not fit the style of the rest of the book, and the work would have benefited from a conclusion, but these are minor quibbles. The reader can learn much from Spencer’s book, but three lessons bear highlighting: (1) the Church made its greatest impact when it focused on those on the margins of society, (2) many of our values are influenced by the teaching that man is made in God’s image and the responsibility this teaching places on us to discharge God’s role on earth, and (3) Christian hypocrisy and self-righteousness leave scars that last generations.

Spencer bases his first chapter, “Why the West is Different,” on a review of *Inventing the Individual* by Larry Siedentop. His main point is that Christianity
and the Church, not the Enlightenment, are the primary sources of our social and political liberties. In a theme that is common throughout the book, Spencer calls for a more honest assessment of history. Here he reminds us that while many historians see antiquity as a “nursery of freedom,” the truth is that the ancient world was not tolerant, free, or equal (11). With Christianity came a “moral revolution,” a revolution focused on the individual. This movement did not define people by social roles or material possessions but by a relationship with God. Christianity brought “a new idea of a voluntary basis for human association in which people joined together through will and love rather than blood or shared material objectives” (14). The Church promoted the idea of individual responsibility and equality for all. Spencer supports his claim by examining gender equality, opportunities for learning, and socio-economic equality in worship. He argues that the Church and the papacy influenced the following legal and moral structures, which made the West a distinct entity by about 1200 A.D.: a church not under secular authority, political leadership that came from God but was not divine, people receiving equal judgment, and the roots of a civil society.

In chapter 2, “A Christian Nation,” Spencer writes that, beginning with Pope Gregory sending missionaries to the English people in 597, Christianity and the Bible have played an important role in the making of Britain. Spencer is careful to note that the influence of the Church has not always been positive, and this is a recurring qualification in the book: “The Bible has been used by many over the centuries to justify political disenfranchisement, subservience and inequality” (26). From Wihtred, king of the people of Kent, through Winston Churchill’s “Finest Hour” speech, Spencer outlines the important role of law and history in the formation of England and how both were influenced by the Bible and Christianity.

In chapter 3, “Trouble with the Law: Magna Carta and the Limits of the Law,” Spencer argues that the concepts of due process and limitations on the powers of a king had a historical antecedent that was based, in part, on the Bible. Again, he calls for balance: “The Church was central to the story of the Great Charter, though we should certainly not canonize its role” (41). Spencer asks us to look beyond the annulment of the charter by Pope Innocent III and instead focus on the theological role of the Church. Spencer discusses how the church, as an independent institution, forced political leaders to recognize limitations to their power and jurisdictions. He concludes by identifying the troubling trend of relying on law as the main tool of morality, and the vast increase of the number of laws and the corresponding decline of religion.

In chapter 4, “Christianity and Democracy: Friend and Foe,” Spencer examines whether Christianity has supported or opposed democracy and concludes that it has done both. He positions his argument by outlining two opposing views of Christianity’s influence on democracy—whether it is the fount of all our democratic freedoms or whether these freedoms are a result of our emancipation from Christianity. Again, his focus is not “Western” but English as he examines the role of Christianity on political authority, political liberty, and democratic liberty. He briefly mentions Charlemagne and early American democracy but unfortunately does not explain how Christianity has shaped
democratic institutions outside of England. According to Spencer, the English drew on the stories of kings from the Old Testament and learned two primary lessons: the authority of kings came from God and kings must defend the Church in order to advance the Christian faith. The most important influence was the value the Bible sets on all life. The poor, widows, orphans, and the weak all deserve protection and equal access to justice. Spencer is not consistent when evaluating the impact of the Reformation on Western values—in some chapters it is seen as having a negative influence, but in this chapter Spencer argues that the Reformation resulted in a form of “spiritual democracy in which everyone was entitled to access to the founding documents of their faith and decide for themselves how they should live and worship” (59). According to Spencer, this value sows the seeds for democratic liberty.

In chapter 5, Spencer argues that both believers and atheists share a belief in the value of human beings but that by relying merely on a legal definition of worth, a non-religious approach to humanism only survives due to a fragile collective will. A more solid foundation for humanism is found in Christianity, namely in the fact that humans are made in the image of God. Here we find the heart of the argument of how Christianity has influenced Western values: “Humans are not creatures that are valued by God because they bear the imago dei. Humans are creatures that bear the imago dei because they are valued by God” (74). Spencer demonstrates how odd this teaching was to the ancient world. The early Church’s focus on the universality and impartiality of God’s love, the attention and respect to those on the margins of society, the attitude towards the unborn, the reluctance to take human life all resulted in an “empire-transforming ideological and practical commitment to the dignity and worth of the human” (76). For the Church to have impact today, it would do us much good to remember this history.

I was surprised to find a chapter on atheism (chapter 6), but the author, always committed to an impartial reckoning of Christianity’s role in history, makes a strong case that atheism’s emergence owes much to Christian thought and practice. He traces the beginning of atheism to four pivotal causes resulting in the deterioration of the Christian worldview in the sixteenth century: the rediscovery of ancient texts (principally Lucretius’ De rerum natura), exploration and trade (the New World is not referenced in the Bible), the idea that might makes right (popularized by Machiavelli’s The Prince), and the Catholic/Protestant schism. A strength of this chapter is the author’s decision to expand his research beyond the English Channel. As he shifts his focus, we see the impact of the Church in Revolutionary France and Russia and how the clergy’s support of the American Revolution dampened the embrace of atheism in the United States. Students of history yearning for lessons that address Christianity today should pay special attention to Spencer’s observation of the French Revolution: “What united and inspired them was the intellectually and politically narrow, hypocritical, oppressive and often viciously brutal Christian culture in which they lived, one that, failing to bend, finally snapped in 1789” (82).
In chapter 7, Spencer aims to show that the caricature of Christianity as anti-scientific is inaccurate but with this caution: while Christianity did influence the Scientific Revolution, this was in part accidental. He points out that the medieval church resisted Aristotle but argues that “science,” as we understand it now, did not exist back then. The Church did not reject science altogether, but rather it rejected philosophies that drew false conclusions from studying the natural world. He highlights the support for the study of nature by Francis Bacon and John Calvin as a means of understanding the majesty of God. The Fellows of the Royal Society were “doing nothing less than forging a new Eden” as they studied nature “to help recover lost Adamic knowledge.” (104) Being made in the image of God facilitated man’s study of nature. In this chapter, the author again explores the impact of the discovery of the New World and the Protestant Reformation but here draws different conclusions. The New World demonstrated that the ancients were not omniscient and that the old way of reading the world was insufficient. The schism resulted in an epistemological crisis as each side sought to undermine the other: Protestants attacked Jerome’s Vulgate and Catholics the Hebrew Masoretic text. In the end, Spencer argues, theologians began to rely more on science and literary criticism, but the result was a Bible that was damaged in the process.

If Spencer’s goal is to demonstrate how Christianity has shaped our values, chapter 8 on Charles Darwin does not contribute to it. The main purpose of the chapter is a warning of the dangers we face when we divorce Christianity from history: “Darwin gives us a window on how it is that inattentiveness to the deep foundations of our own culture can desensitize us to the fragility of the social and ethical edifices we build on them” (112). The author provides interesting observations regarding Darwin’s religious beliefs (his favorable opinion of missionaries in the South Pacific, his own service as a member of a parish council, etc.), and perhaps his goal is to reframe our assessment of Darwin. The chapter was more an indictment of Victorian morality (ethical behavior without Biblical teaching) than an exploration of how the theory of evolution has been influenced by Christians or the Church. The author begins chapter 9 by positing that religious rights are a human right—they are not incompatible with other rights. He concludes by examining the important role the Catholic Church in general, and Jacques Maritain in particular, played in defending against a communistic state and in promoting human rights. Spencer’s key observation in this chapter is that God has rights, and since we are created in his image and are doing his work on earth, we also have rights:

The Old Testament’s obsessive focus on the widows, orphans, resident aliens and poor, is that God holds his people accountable for doing justice in a highly personal way. Failing to do so is to fail in obligations to God himself, to wrong God, to deprive him of that to which he has a right. If one acknowledges this – that God, in effect, has rights – one has made a crucial move towards recognizing natural human rights. That is precisely
how Scripture does envisage humans, bearing his image, imitating his nature, discharging his role on earth. (130)

There are strong correlations between this chapter and the one on humanism, both tracing the impact of man being created in God’s image on the shaping of the Western world’s concept of individual dignity. The Biblical teaching to protect the poor, orphans and widows mandates the promotion of individual rights regardless of socioeconomic status, and through Christ all races have the same rights.

Like chapter one, chapter 10 is also a book review. Here, Spencer discusses *A Secular Age* by Charles Taylor. According to Taylor, at around the year 1500 A.D., man lived in an enchanted world, where good and bad spirits were believed to have existed. There was a “porous boundary” between inner personal agency and outer impersonal force, between the mind and the world, between the moral and the physical (140). The Reformation changed this, resulting in a “buffered self,” a self that was separated and insulated from the rest of the world, where agency was relocated from having been everywhere to lying solely within the human mind (140, 142). The result was a culture that pushed God to the periphery: “God’s goals for humans shrank to the single end of enabling us to achieve our own good . . . religion narrowed to moralism and elided with happiness as duty and self-interest coalesced” (142). What followed was a desire in the West for “authenticity,” “alternative spiritual sources,” and “non-theistic religious beliefs and phenomena”—all of which ended in increased credulity and the continued search for meaning.

Spencer included other book reviews in *The Evolution of the West* in a way that supported his thesis that Christianity has shaped Western values. Unfortunately, he made no effort to integrate the review on which chapter 11 is based into the greater whole of his work. It appears he merely dropped his review of *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* by Thomas Piketty into this book. The review has merit, but Spencer makes little effort to address what the Bible teaches about wealth and poverty, or the work of the Church to help the poor, or how Christianity has shaped (or has been shaped by) capitalism. This is an important topic that would have benefited from his ability to place economics in a historical and religious context.

Spencer concludes with an interesting analysis of how different Christian denominations address welfare. It is a unique chapter; he draws most of his lessons from Scandinavian countries (missing from the book up to now), and he moves beyond general observations about “Christianity” or the “Church” and instead studies Reformed Protestantism, Lutheranism, and Catholicism. He identifies three broad classifications of welfare regimes: liberal, conservative, and social democratic as well as their respective principles of need, contribution, and citizenship. “With unduly broad theological brushstrokes” he then identifies the underlying attitudes to poverty and work that emerged in different Christian cultures (178). Catholics view the poor as “acute images of Christ” and have long emphasized the duty of taking care of those in poverty. In contrast, Lutherans found dignity and significance in work and linked non-work with laziness,
drawing a firm line “between the deserving poor and the undeserving” (174). He concludes his analysis by including the factors of family and gender roles.

In today’s climate of partisanship and entrenched positions, it is rare to find an author who tries to find common ground, especially regarding topics such as rights, law, democracy, and science. Mr. Spencer’s attempt to trace Christianity’s influence on Western values is an admirable example of applied scholarship. His book is a work that gently reminds the reader of the Bible’s influence on what many today believe are secular institutions. The West we know is not the result of an emancipation from the Church, but it is a society that evolved with the Church, based on revolutionary Biblical teachings that mandate that all are equal under God’s love and judgment and that Christians have a duty to discharge on earth. Knowing this history will help today’s Church. A reminder of past mistakes instills needed humility, while highlighting past cultural contributions reissues the call to continue to shape society’s values.

Reviewed by Matthew R. Bardowell

As befits its title, *The Enigma of Egill,* a revised and updated translation of Torfi H. Tulinius’s 2004 book *Skáldið í skriftinni: Snorri Sturluson og Egils saga,* begins by posing a riddle. What, Torfi Tulinius asks, does it mean that the bones of a pagan poet are buried on hallowed ground beneath a church in Hrísbrú, Iceland? *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* recounts this episode, and the bones in question belong to its eponymous hero Egill Skallagrímsson, who was a renowned Viking and poet and certainly not someone who would be associated with the Church. Why, then, would his bones have been interred not just on hallowed ground but directly beneath the altar, the most sacred of locations within the church and the burial spot reserved for those of high Christian distinction? In asking these questions, Torfi Tulinius directs his readers to the two worlds he aims to bring together in consideration of the saga that bears Egill’s name: the pagan and the Christian.

It is often the case when analyzing a medieval text that one must navigate between a presentation that focuses on the text itself, what Torfi Tulinius calls the “object,” and the culture in which the text was composed. Exacerbating this tension is the general uncertainty of authorship regarding these texts. Without a clear author, it is tempting to view these works as the product of collective social forces rather than art objects arising from individual genius. Torfi Tulinius navigates these challenges admirably. The book’s structure aids him in this. The first half of the book examines *Egils saga* as an art object, and the second half treats the saga in its cultural context. The beginning student of *Egils saga* will find a gamboling recapitulation of the narrative in the first section along with a helpful conception of the saga’s formal structure. Torfi Tulinius’s aim here is to offer an alternative appraisal of a narrative that is often regarded to be stronger and more focused in its first half than it is in its second (20). The scholars who hold this view of *Egils saga* arrive there by attributing the shape of the latter portion of the text as a product of oral transmission that has taken place over a long period of time.

If this were the case, then the author becomes more of a compiler of these sources than someone who took a more active role in its composition. The scattershot quality of the final half of the text would then be a consequence of the “excess of information about Egill” over which the author “was unable to impose a suitable form” (21). Thus, it is important for Torfi Tulinius to discern a coherent structure that can reflect a possible authorial shaping. In taking this approach, he deviates from recent studies such as Tommy Danielsson’s *Hrafnkels saga, eller Fallet med den undflyende tradition* (2002) and Gísli Sigurðsson’s *The Medieval Icelandic Sagas and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method* (2004). Torfi Tulinius is careful to acknowledge the significance of oral tradition in the
production of the sagas. He reminds us that even these recent studies do not rule out “authorial fashioning” and suggests that this oral material would still have been subject to the author’s alterations (21, fn. 7). Given this position, one would expect that Torfi Tulinius believes there is an identifiable author for *Egils saga*, and he does. Torfi Tulinius sides with those who think that the author of *Egils saga* was likely the thirteenth-century Icelandic author and politician Snorri Sturluson, and he mounts an argument that treads carefully between the motivations of Snorri and the social commonplaces of medieval composition.

The contours of the narrative, Torfi Tulinius argues, reveal a text concerned with conversion. This interest allows him to make progress toward his eventual answer to the riddle of Egill’s burial because such a hallowed resting place could only be possible if Egill had forsaken his pagan roots for the new, Christian faith adopted by Iceland through the course of the sagas action. To this end, Torfi Tulinius invests the Christianity of the saga with greater significance than it is sometimes treated. A case in point of this seriousness can be seen from Torfi Tulinius’s treatment of Egill’s prime-signing. During the Icelandic conversion to Christianity, new converts would sometimes receive the rite of *prima signatio*, a ritual in which the sign of the cross was made over the individual as a precursor to baptism (66). While prime-signing might be undertaken with sincerity, it was also at times a mere formality required of any pagan person who wished to have dealings with a Christian (Jón Stefánsson 289).

Torfi Tulinius chooses to view Egill’s prime-signing as the beginning of his conversion and finds evidence in the text to show that Egill did seem to forsake pagan sacrifices, as was required of prime-signed men (67). From here, Torfi Tulinius traces Egill’s progress throughout the saga along a spectrum of conversion that leads from sin, to grief, to contrition, and, finally, to repentance.

In advancing this argument, the first half of the book is a model of intertextual analysis, which is most evident in his second chapter, entitled “The Fabric of the Text.” In this chapter, Torfi Tulinius places the action and characters of the saga within an intricate web of cultural and literary influences that greatly enrich the reader’s understanding of the intellectual inheritance of thirteenth-century Iceland. One structural trait that allows Torfi Tulinius to make gains in this direction is his observation that much of the saga’s action seems concerned with the differences between brothers and the betrayals and guilt these differences occasion. Torfi Tulinius follows this theme through much of the saga’s action, and he aligns Egill’s sometimes strained relationship with his brother Þórólfr with several Biblical characters who had an antagonistic relationship. Most notably, Torfi Tulinius argues that Egill resembles Cain in his dealings with his brother, who resembles Abel. Torfi Tulinius’s erudition in these matters is evident from his reading of Egill’s grief after Þórólfr’s death in battle for King Athelstan. As Egill sits in the hall of King Athelstan, his face is downcast and his eye brows raise and lower by turns. Torfi Tulinius reads the strong emotion on Egill’s face as guilt at having bettered his position with respect to his inheritance (Egill is the younger of the two brothers) and also with his chances to marry his brother’s wife, Ásgerðr, with whom he is in love. Torfi Tulinius explores themes of fratricide on the Biblical texts the Icelanders would have had available to them in
the thirteenth century as well as similar themes in Old Norse myth and legend.
His ability to weave together thematic elements in these Biblical texts with Eddic poems like Grímnismál and the story of Hóðr’s unwitting killing of his brother Baldr highlight the rich and ranging textual influences that he believes are all incorporated toward the end of telling this particular redemption story.

At times the Biblical allusions Torfi Tulinius locates in the text seem very heavily veiled. Even Egill’s relationship to Cain must be understood as only partial. Egill, after all, can be said to be responsible for his brother’s death only in a secondary way. But Torfi Tulinius presents various medieval conceptions of Cain that do bear striking resemblances to Egill. Their swarthiness, their ugliness in comparison to their brothers, and even their twitching eye brows were all traits that the medieval church understood to signify Cain (92-93). In another place, Torfi Tulinius suggests a connection between Þórólfr’s failure to take enough steps to strike at the king and the death of Uriah the Hittite in 2 Samuel 11. In both cases, the men die in battle as a consequence of advancing beyond the protection of their fellow warriors, thus leaving themselves open to attack (Torfi Tulinius 98). These moments differ in ways that cast doubt on such a comparison. Þórólfr, for instance, advances in an attempt to strike the king but fails to advance far enough. His dying words illustrate his intention: “I took three steps too few here” (Egils saga 49). By contrast, Uriah is slain when his supporting army withdraws from battle, leaving him exposed and vulnerable to the enemy. But as Torfi Tulinius continues to develop the connection, there are some persuasive comparisons. Egill, like David, will end up marrying the widow of the slain warrior. Both men lose a son, which Torfi Tulinius interprets as divine punishment, and both Egill and David are skilled poets. While some of these connections are do not always seem convincing, the sheer volume of associations and potential sources for the composition of this saga serve the reader well. The result is a rich set of analyses of the saga that are informed by thirteenth-century religious texts that would have been know to the Icelanders even in the vernacular—the Icelandic Homily Book and the Stjórn, a collection of translations of numerous books of the Bible (78). One such connection is a brief reference to the Biblical book of Numbers in Egill’s comemorative poem for his deceased son Boðvarr. In one stanza of this poem, Egill references the rod that Moses carries from the temple, blooming with almond blossoms. This reference, Torfi Tulinius argues, is peculiar in the mouth of a pagan poet, but seems to reference the activity of the Holy Spirit in his own act of poetic composition (135-36). With these and other allusions, the book offers a rich presentation of the religious thought current in Iceland during the time of saga production.

The second half of the book follows the same thread of sin and repentance and suggests that the saga is in some way a veiled confession and attempted expiation of the purported author Snorri Sturluson. In these latter chapters, Torfi Tulinius sets these themes within the context of Snorri Sturluson’s life and offers a detailed account of the power dynamics and political intrigues that animated Snorri’s life. These intrigues center around Snorri and his kinsmen vying for possession of a chieftaincy in Iceland, and this account presents Snorri as politically calculating but also sensitive to the personal rifts his machinations
cause among himself, his brother, his sons, and his nephews. According to this view, Torfi Tulinius suggests that *Egils saga*, then, is “a work of art with a social function” (265). The author of *Egils saga* utilizes the character of Egill to fashion a story toward his own purposes. In this sense, the author or *Egils saga* writes a story that is meant to re-structure reality, which is all the more evident when the reader considers that the author is trying to make amends for personal sin. Torfi Tulinius is indebted to the sociological theories of Pierre Bourdieu here, specifically the notion that literary works mediate the experience of reality and have important social consequences (203-04). In the case of *Egils saga*, Torfi Tulinius suggests, these consequences are to garner political support by attaching himself to the illustrious saga hero, and to “express personal repentance” for conflicts with his own kinsmen. Torfi Tulinius’s closes with a caution urging scholars not to classify discrete portions of Old Norse sagas simplistically as either pagan or Christian. One of the virtues of his intertextual approach to this saga is that it allows us to consider how diverse influences flow together to create a text that is complex but also, perhaps, more unified that is commonly believed.

Scholars and students are fortunate to have this English translation of Torfi Tulinius’s analysis of *Egils saga*. Whether such scholars are interested in this particular saga or the family sagas in general, Torfi Tulinius here offers an informative guide to considering these thirteenth-century works in their societal contexts. His work reminds us that the family sagas, even structurally, have conversion narratives at their center in one way or another and that attention to the multitude of social, cultural, and individual forces that contribute to their production offers complex and illuminating readings, which have value even if one resists them in a few of their particulars. Above these concerns regarding content and influence, Torfi Tulinius’s study appeals, in a far more broad way, to the transformative quality of artistic production—its ability to shape and re-shape personal experiences and its role in presenting and comprehending the reality of a culture even after the events it relates are enshrined in history.

**Works Cited**


Reviewed by Matt Miller

A Kind of Giant and Intricate Poetry

The question of Christ and culture, to use the phrase from H. Richard Niebuhr, is one that has vexed Christians to varying degrees throughout the history of the church. Christians have often sensed a profound tension between being set apart from the world and yet also being sent into it as agents of redemption. Cultural artifacts like works of literature have been the most important loci for working out such tensions.

For early Christians like Jerome, Tertullian, or Augustine, with no history of Christian literature to draw on beyond the canon of Scripture, it was of immense importance to discern whether they could think with pagan work like Plato and Cicero without compromising their faithfulness. As the Gospel moved out into the world at the beginning of the Middle Ages, Anglo-Saxon Christians grappled afresh with how to relate their new faith to their cultural heritage and the legends of their pagan ancestors.

In the modern era, the growth of secularism as an overtly threatening culture has prompted Christians to take up the cultural question with new energy, producing a cottage industry of books. For two of the more popular recent works on the subject, see Andy Crouch, *Culture Making*, and James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World*.

David Lyle Jeffrey and Gregory Maillet’s *Christianity and Literature: Philosophical Foundations and Critical Practice* operates within the tradition of reflections on Christ and culture—indeed, the book is published within this Christian Worldview Integration series, designed to help Christian students approach their cultural vocations from a robustly Christian point of view. Yet it is also a kind of handbook or anthology of faith and literature, illustrating how faith and art have interacted throughout history, in works by Christians and non-Christians alike.

Near the beginning of this ambitious and learned book, Jeffrey and Maillet quote approvingly Marilynne Robinson’s observation that “great theology is always a kind of giant and intricate poetry, like epic or saga” (41). In Jeffrey and Maillet’s hands, the reverse is also true: literary art is a grand and ongoing theology, one that illuminates the relationship of Christ and culture at nearly every turn.

The combination of philosophical and historical reflection in Jeffrey and Maillet’s work is salutary, not just because it sets their contribution apart from other, more philosophical/theological treatments such as Niebuhr, Crouch, and Hunter, but because the authors are on their strongest ground when interacting with these historical sources.
Jeffrey and Maillet model their conviction that Christianity and literature have much to say to one another by giving an overview of how the two have interacted in major historical periods. Arguing against the “dour abstemiousness” of those Christians who would wall off Christianity from culture entirely, they claim that “the rich tradition of literature in the West has in fact remained at the most fundamental level of its priorities more integratively biblical than secular or classical” (139). They demonstrate this claim with a rich discussion beginning with literary analysis of the Bible itself, and then carrying through the Middle Ages down to the current period. In each era, they look at a variety of writers—from the great names of the curriculum like Shakespeare and Milton to more obscure figures like hymnodist William Cowper or novelist Michael D. O’Brien—that draw on biblical themes or literary models, illuminating them with contextual insights from theology, liturgy, and history.

Jeffrey and Maillet find special value in works that manifest an orthodox Christian sensibility, and much of the work develops a canon of literature that could unambiguously be termed Christian literature, from medieval devotional poetry such as *Pearl* to the writings of C. S. Lewis. This might suggest a relationship between Christ and culture that is simply creative: Christians create Christian works and disdain those from outside their tradition. Yet Jeffrey and Maillet’s understanding of the cultural question is not so straightforward, as illustrated by their sensitive and thoughtful engagement with less orthodox writers, from Blake and Melville to Faulkner and Joyce. In so doing, they model Christian culture-making that sees all beauty and truth as legitimate subjects of inquiry, no matter their source. In so doing, Jeffrey and Maillet claim all the world’s truth and beauty in the service of Christ. By the exercise of wisdom, charity, and discernment, Christian students of literature are empowered to discover God’s truth even in works written in a spirit of profanation.

Jeffrey and Maillet undergird this engagement with literature of all philosophies with a compelling theological aesthetic. They describe beauty as objective reality rather than subjective perception, grounding their reflections in the nature of God and His creation. “Beauty in the ultimate Christian sense,” they argue, “does not depend any more than does truth upon our taste for it” (47). For Jeffrey and Maillet, beauty in fact does not rest in the eye of the beholder, but inheres in the creation itself since God is the source of all beauty. Accordingly, beauty in a work of art arises from a true perception of God’s glory and His work in creation. Though we see through a glass darkly, and our notions of beauty may become twisted—we may come to prefer the airbrushed “glories” of the pornographer to “the freckled face of an ordinary little ‘Mary’” (48)—that does not indict beauty itself, but only our perception of it. To the extent that beauty appears in culture, then, Christians can freely praise it, for even the unbeliever may catch a glimmer of natural revelation in the truly beautiful face of a child.

The model of Christ and culture here does not fall into a neat category for how the church relates to culture, nor does it enable either rejection or wholesale acceptance of culture. Instead, it calls Christians to go about their literary lives in the same way they go about any other behavior: with faith, hope, love, and discernment. At their best, Jeffrey and Maillet demonstrate that Christian literary
critics can respond to secular or anti-Christian works in a spirit of charitable inquiry, rather than a shallow acceptance or reflexive shunning. A theology of culture centered on the true perception of beauty offers the Christian student who picks up this book much to work from.

Unfortunately, Jeffrey and Maillot are not fully consistent in carrying through this theology of culture. While they find something of value in every period and type of literature, they pass over contemporary literary theory as “substantially unprofitable” (308). They define postmodern theory in total as a philosophy that adheres to a pragmatic theory of truth, in which “something may be held to be true if believing it somehow ‘works’ in a political or social sense” (55). Postmodernism, on this reading—which they draw largely from William James and Richard Rorty—is cynical, deploying truth in the service of therapeutic comfort (“that’s my truth”) or political power.

Such an account of postmodernism is reductive to say the least. It is certainly true that much of what we call postmodernism is inimical to Christian faith and practice, but this is not because postmodernists reject truth. Even if Rorty’s pragmatism could be reduced to such a rejection, his views are not representative of postmodernism entire. For instance, the major postmodernist Stanley Fish, when asked point blank by Southern Baptist theologian Al Mohler whether truth exists and can it be known, replied:

Yes. There’s no attack on the concept of knowledge in my work unless by “know” you mean “know in a way that could be demonstrated to any rational person no matter what his beliefs or lack of beliefs.” That’s, of course, a very severe requirement, and it’s basically the requirement of knowledge independently [sic] of any human perspective. That kind of knowledge is not available to us. (AlbertMohler.com)

Fish continues his remarks by observing that those who “make a living, as it were, out of attacking religion” are most willing to enforce a narrow notion of truth because it gives them an empirical, rational whip with which to beat the more intangible truths of faith. Postmodernism therefore does not reject truth or reduce it to the exercise of power, but rather insists that our knowledge of truth has historical contingencies that we are not fully able to overcome. A pragmatic theory of truth need not mean cynicism, deploying invented truths in pursuit of power, but rather a humble recognition of the gap between divine knowledge and human limits—a profoundly Christian theme found in Job 42:3, Proverbs 20:24, 1 Corinthians 13:9-12, and James 4:14.

For just one more example, we could look at Bruno Latour, a pioneer in the sociological examination of science, who has made his career by arguing that scientists do not merely discover knowledge, but in fact make it through the skills of lab work and the operation of scientific institutions. Such an account of truth might seem relativistic, but in fact Latour does not view it so, seeing himself as one “who adds reality to matters of fact and [does] not subtract reality” (“Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” Critical Inquiry 30.2, 2004, 232). As with Fish, Latour sees the requirement that
truth be independent of human action and unconstructed as “a very severe requirement,” and one we need not meet. To say that scientists make knowledge is not to say that knowledge does not exist—Latour is no fan of those who dismiss science—it is merely to get a clearer picture of what knowledge is, a property held by human beings, creatures of limited abilities and deep flaws.

Jeffrey and Maillet seem to have little interest in parsing the differences between postmodernists or giving a nuanced account of current literary theory. Given the hegemony of theory in English departments, such an impatience is understandable and might even reflect a commendable resistance to fashion. Yet Christian students who wish to face “a dark century,” to adapt Jeffrey and Maillet’s quote from Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, “and see there the victory of Christ” need engagements with postmodernism that do not resist grappling with it in its particulars (269). Christians in literary studies have not provided many models for doing so, sadly, and so those who would see how to proclaim Christus victor over the powers of postmodernism will need to look to the work of philosophers and theologians like James K. A. Smith, David Bentley Hart, and John Milbank. With their discussion of objective beauty and sense of how Christ’s truth plays in historical literature, Jeffrey and Maillet are an invaluable supplement to that discussion.
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