

Afterword

Whatever Happened to the Sagas?

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ABSTRACT: The author, who has himself written novels inspired by the Middle Ages, discusses the development of medievalism in Icelandic literature since Halldór Laxness's *Gerpla* (1952)—with a particular eye on novels composed since 2000.

RÉSUMÉ: L'auteur, qui a lui-même écrit des romans inspirés du Moyen Âge, évoque l'évolution du médiévalisme dans la littérature islandaise depuis le *Gerpla* de Halldór Laxness (1952)—avec un regard particulier porté sur les romans composés depuis 2000.

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he publication of Halldór Laxness's *Gerpla* in 1952, eight years after Iceland became a republic in 1944, coincided with the highlight of the popularity and influence of the medieval Sagas of Icelanders in modern times. For a century before the arrival of *Gerpla*, the sagas had been pivotal texts for the Icelandic national identity, the “saga age” having been assigned the role of a golden age in Icelandic history by poets and scholars alike.

It is also an important fact that in this period (1850–1950) all the sagas were published in popular editions in Iceland for the first time by the bookseller Sigurður Kristjánsson, who died at 97 in the same year *Gerpla* was published. Thus these texts were now made affordable for the masses on an unprecedented scale and now, perhaps for the first time, they became a national treasure accessible to all social classes. A part of the national myth of the sagas for most of the twentieth century was that this close relationship with the sagas was merely a continuation of an age-old love affair. To this day there is considerable belief in the notion that the sagas have always been close to the heart of the Icelandic populace, an idea that finds curiously little support from preserved documents, such as letters and registers, from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For more on the development of this view see Ármann Jakobsson, “Þörfin fyrir sanna sögu” (2018) [The Need for a True Story]. It is worthy of note that in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century there was a conservative turn in the development of the Icelandic language, with saga Icelandic becoming more accessible to an Icelander in 1952 than it would have been to an early nineteenth-century Icelander.

One of the themes explored by Halldór Laxness himself in his previous three-volume novel *Íslandsklukkan* (1943–1946) [*Iceland's Bell*] is the relationship between the sagas and the nation. This novel is partly inspired by the life of famous bibliophile Árni Magnússon (1663–1730) and his zealous quest for old Icelandic manuscripts in the early eighteenth century. While *Íslandsklukkan* does not present any easy truths about the relationship between the people and the sagas, it speaks clearly to the feeling of the time that the manuscripts belonged in Iceland and that their deportation was a part of the national tragedy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when Icelanders suffered under Danish rule. It was perhaps not wholly unexpected that Halldór Laxness's iconoclastic treatment of the sagas in *Gerpla* became far more controversial.

As Jón Karl Helgason has noted in *Hetjan og höfundurinn. Brot úr íslenskri menningarsögu* (1998) [The Hero and the Author: A Fragment of Icelandic Cultural History], the Icelandic relationship with the sagas was also changing precisely at that point in history, as the focus of the adulation shifted from the saga protagonists (Gunnar, Héðinn, and Njáll) to the unknown geniuses, represented for the most part by known genius Snorri Sturluson (d. 1241), who composed the

sagas in the thirteenth century. According to Jón Karl, Halldór Laxness played a significant role in this shift, being far more interested in the sagas as works of art than sources about past events. The nucleus of the shift was that the saga events and their veracity were no longer as instrumental to the importance of the sagas to the national identity; the sagas could now be enjoyed as works of art comparable to the works of Homer and Shakespeare.

This shift from history to literature may have led the way for a fruitful period in saga studies from the 1960s onwards where many of the old truths about the sagas were re-evaluated and, even more prominently, scholars of Old Norse started asking new and unexpected questions. I discuss this historiography further in “Enginn tími fyrir umræðu” (2013) [No Time for Debate]; over time, a more intellectual approach to the sagas led to them becoming less of a national treasure. The cultural capital of artistic creation did not seem to equal that of a true golden past, and it could be argued that abandoning some of the old myths concerning the sagas has ended up making them less useful to society at large. There is no doubt that, since 1952, fewer and fewer people are enjoying the sagas as free readers whereas they are still being taught in school as a part of an important cultural heritage.

In 1952, *Gerpla* was seen as a radical and vulgar book that denigrated the sagas (see Hughes in this volume). The Marxist and pacifist criticism of the concept of heroism was seen as a major slight for the whole nation, which was supposed to be unified in its love of the sagas and represented by their genius. More than sixty years later, it is hard to imagine a new treatment of the sagas that would receive such a reaction. In between there were fifty years of literary criticism where the sagas were interpreted in various ways. Even more significant, after Iceland had been independent for decades, the need for placing “national texts” on a pedestal may have been far less acute. National unity and a golden past are less important to the new religion of capitalism and globalism, where the sagas may even seem outdated and useless.

Sixty years after the publication of *Gerpla*, in spite of the diminished role of the sagas in modern Iceland, there is no shortage of contemporary Icelandic authors who use the sagas as inspiration. There is also no shortage of different methods for utilizing the sagas. Among the most original is Bergsveinn Birgisson who has recently published a study of the settler Geirmundur heljariskinn, *Leitin að svarta víkingnum* (2016) [The Quest for the Black Viking]. Moreover, he has also published his own “saga,” *Geirmundar saga heljariskinns* (2015) [The Saga of Geirmundur Hellskin] where he not only lovingly imitates the sagas themselves but also writes a prologue as a homage to the early editors of the Íslenzk fornrit series, including Sigurður Nordal and Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, both of whom influenced Halldór Laxness. Equally postmodern is Þórunn Valdimarsdóttir’s juxtaposition of the sagas and the highly popular Nordic noir genre in both *Kalt er annars blóð* (2007) [Cold is the Blood of Another] and *Mörg eru ljónsins eyru* (2010) [Many are the Ears

of a Lion]. Bergsveinn is concerned with the gaps in the medieval narratives and trying to read behind the story while Þórunn is more concerned with her own creative interpretation of well-known saga characters, as is Bjarni Harðarson who makes the most infamous character from *Njáls saga* his narrator in *Mörður* (2014),¹ somewhat in the tradition of Gregory Maguire.

Vilborg Davíðsdóttir is arguably the most prolific writer of medievalist novels in Iceland today, having published seven novels with a medieval theme, including most recently a reimagining of the story of the settler Auður the Subtle, a skeletal figure in the medieval sources that Vilborg fleshes out in *Auður* (2009), *Vígröði* (2012) [Light to Kill], and *Blóðug jörð* (2017) [Bloody Ground]. A no less ambitious project is Einar Kárason's four volume reinterpretation of the thirteenth-century *Sturlunga saga: Óvinafagnaður* (2001) [A Gathering of Foes], *Ofsi* (2008) [Hubris], *Skáld* (2012) [Poet], and *Skálmöld* (2014) [Age of War]. Again we see a difference in interest: while Vilborg peers past the sources, Einar is more concerned with his own interpretation of a lengthy medieval text. Both novelists have had much success and Einar has followed up his novels with theatrical renderings of *Sturlunga saga* itself. The reception of both projects highlights a significant shift since the 1950s: no longer are the sagas seen as sacred texts that should be left alone. On the contrary, authors are applauded for relating those inaccessible texts to the masses. The same happened with a recent radical theatrical rendering of *Njála* (directed by Þorleifur Örn Arnarson, 2015) in the Reykjavík City Theatre. The performance received universal adulation and won multiple awards. In 2016, no “defenders” of the sagas appear to object to their treatment. In fact, it is an almost universally acknowledged truth that the enterprise is helpful to the sagas that badly need this help to reach a modern audience, in spite of being as ubiquitous in the Icelandic school system as *The Catcher in the Rye* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* are in English-speaking high schools.

A pedagogical approach strongly informs the work of Brynhildur Þórarinsdóttir who started her career with retellings of three of the most popular sagas: *Njála* (2002), *Egla* (2004), and *Laxdæla* (2006). The enterprise was well received, demonstrating that in the 21st century the sagas are clearly not seen as children's literature anymore, another significant shift from the age of *Gerpla*. Brynhildur followed up with *Gásagatan* (2009) [The Gásir Mystery], a mystery novel in the tradition of Enid Blyton (a hugely popular author in Iceland in the latter half of the twentieth century). The novel takes place in the thirteenth century to the backdrop of events of *Sturlunga saga*.

Þórarinn Eldjárn is an author who has always worked with the history and culture of Iceland, winning considerable acclaim for his novels *Kyrr kjör* (1983) [Status Quo] and *Brotahöfuð* (1996) [The Blue Tower] where he reimagines the lives of poets and scholars from the seventeenth century. In 2012, he too turned his attention to the sagas, with *Hér liggur skáld* [Here Lies a Poet], his take on the fourteenth-century *Þorleifs þátr jarlaskálds* [Tale of Þorleif Poet of the Earl] from

the *Flateyjarbók* compendium and other medieval narratives, where Þorleifr makes an appearance as a troublesome poet not afraid to defy kings and magnates. Þórarinn's method is highly distinguishable and it could be argued that his version of the old saga is more Þórarinn than saga. Indeed all the aforementioned texts are successful precisely because the authors are more faithful to their own projects and do not see themselves as mere mediators of the sagas.

The present author has also participated in the recent medievalist trend with a novel, *Glæsir* (2011) [Bull], and a children's book, *Síðasti galdrameistarinn* (2014) [The Last Magician]. As I suspect is the case with all the authors mentioned above, my primary aim has not been to mediate the sagas, although that is a definite secondary aim, but to use them as inspiration to create compelling fiction. *Glæsir* is based on the events narrated in the thirteenth-century *Eyrbyggja saga* which is currently not as well-known as *Njáls saga* or *Egils saga*. In the saga, one of the least sympathetic and most villainous characters is Þórólfr Twistfoot whose hostility to anyone and everyone in life is superseded only by his malfeasance in death, when he becomes an undead and manages to depopulate a whole valley. Þórólfr was indeed one of the principal subjects of a scholarly article I published in 2005, "The Specter of Old Age: Nasty Old Men in the Sagas of Icelanders." Much later, however, I wanted to interpret him in the more liberal form of the novel and that is how *Glæsir* was born. After his death and his hauntings, Þórólfr apparently possesses a calf called Glæsir who ends up causing misfortune. I place Þórólfr inside the mind of the calf, narrating the events of his life from his own point of view.

Narrating the story from the point of view of a selfish villain gives the author multiple opportunities to reinterpret the *Eyrbyggja saga* narrative. Þórólfr is too selfish and blind to other people's feelings to ever become a sympathetic or even a reliable narrator. However, when the story is related from his point of view, the hierarchy and the rules of the saga society naturally come under scrutiny. His nickname Twistfoot provides an opportunity to question the Icelandic tradition of nicknaming people, which has throughout history mostly been interpreted as innocent but can also be seen as stigmatizing and bullying. His hostility towards his son Arnkell, a hero in the saga, can also be seen as ambiguous. Even more complicated are his feelings towards Þóroddr Þorbrandsson who believes he is the rightful owner of Glæsir the bull, not knowing what spectre looms inside it. Þóroddr's kindness has reawakened in him love that he can hardly recognize, having been so unloved throughout his own life, and yet his mission is to kill Þóroddr, in the belief that only in that way can he end his own miserable existence.

My aim was to make Þórólfr emerge as no less villainous but less one-dimensional than in the original saga. His narrative also provides an opportunity to reimagine better-known saga characters such as Snorri the Magnate and Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir. The Sagas of Icelanders are as a rule not particularly critical of violence, usually relating it in a distant, matter-of-fact tone as I noted

in one of my earliest published articles, “Sannyrði sverða” (1994) [The Authenticity of Arms]. In *Glæsir*, the violence becomes more vivid and distasteful, somewhat in the tradition of *Gerpla*. The unreliable narrator justifies it to himself as calculated pragmatism, as a means to an end rather than something he delights in. I myself believe strongly that violence should not be defamiliarized as illogical or inexplicable, and thus instead try to demonstrate through this unreliable narrative that violence is often the logical offspring of a “solution-oriented” mindset.

As this short statement above may show, authors who use the sagas as inspiration must necessarily have a purpose other than just retelling an older narrative. In my own case, my work with the sagas actually results in the impulse to educate being weakened (as I already do that in my work) and the impulse to create becoming stronger. To me the ethics of the sagas are inappropriate for today although knowledge of this literature, indeed knowledge of all good literature, has an important function in the moulding of the modern soul. Thus I find it necessary to take a critical stance towards the sagas, much as I admire them. But in the present day, this is far more accepted than in the age of *Gerpla*.

It was not my intention to follow *Glæsir* with another saga-inspired novel but that nevertheless happened and *Síðasti galdrameistarinn* followed in 2014. As a children’s book, its tone is necessarily much lighter and it partly mimics a classical fairytale structure. Like *Glæsir*, *Síðasti galdrameistarinn* takes place within a saga, in this case *Hrólfs saga kraka*, a late medieval legendary saga concerning a Danish counterpart to King Arthur. Again this is a saga I have published on; see “Le Roi Chevalier: The Royal Ideology and Genre of *Hrólfs saga kraka*” (1999).

While an entertaining read, the medieval *Hrólfs saga kraka* is a strongly misogynistic narrative and for me the starting point was to turn the plot around and perhaps to bring to children a plot that was absolutely contrary to the “psycho bitch” thriller plot so prominent from the 1980s onwards (with the film *Fatal Attraction* (1987) as an important milestone). *Hrólfs saga kraka* indeed has an evil female antagonist, Hrólfr’s half-sister Skuld who in the end kills him with her army of witches, zombies, and ghouls. In *Síðasti galdrameistarinn*, Skuld’s wickedness is presented as a story that turns out to be untrue in the end. In fact, the story mostly concerns narrative and truth and how people tend to believe everything they are told uncritically. The protagonist Kári has been hijacked to take part in a war between male and female, civilization and nature, and military power versus magic and the occult. Fortunately for him he acquires a supernatural helper in the form of a sibyl who turns out to be playing her own power game all along. He also receives important aid from his aunt Heiðr who is the real “last magician” of the story, although the reader is tricked into believing that the title applies to Kári himself right until the end of the story.

Like *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Hrólfs saga kraka* is not well-known and the author decided not to make anything of the connection between the story and the older narrative, allowing the young readers to discover it themselves later in life. Thus the Old

Norse origins of the text are more or less disguised, as the narrative is presented as a fantasy in the *Harry Potter* and *Eragon* vein. The reason for this is perhaps a feeling that cultural heritage should not necessarily always be thrust down people's throat and that readers can be active and make their own discoveries. It is also my impression that readers do not need to know that the story is based on older material to make use of it.

All authors working today with the sagas owe much to Halldór Laxness. At the same time they are working in a completely different environment where the sagas are respected but not seen as sacred, and authors who use the sagas are mostly regarded as showing respect rather than defiling them. It is another story that so many novels based on sagas turn out to be highly successful, not solely because of the audience's wish to get to know the sagas, but perhaps even more importantly because the sagas have a lot to offer in terms of inspiration. They are being used because they are good and thus helpful to the modern authors who want to tell their own stories.

NOTES

1. Translations of the titles of the medieval sagas with which these modern works engage are provided here in the order they are mentioned: *Njáls saga* or *Njála* [*Njal's Saga*], *Egils saga* or *Egla* [*Egil's Saga*], *Laxdæla saga* [*The Saga of the People of Laxardal*], *Sturlunga saga* [*The Saga of the Sturlungs*], *Eyrbyggja saga* [*The Saga of the People of Eyri*], *Hrólfs saga kraka* [*The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*]. English translations of the titles of modern Icelandic works are provided, except where a modern Icelandic literary work is simply named after a character in a medieval saga, as in cases like *Mörður* or *Auður*. The References below list only scholarly works.

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