

Miller, William Ian. 2008. *Audun and the Polar Bear: Luck, Law, and Largesse in a Medieval Tale of Risky Business*. Medieval Law and Its Practice. 1. Leiden: Brill. xii + 156 pages. ISBN: 978 90 04 16811 4.

This small book comes as a pendant to Miller's major contributions on routine social interaction, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (1997), *The Mystery of Courage* (2000), and *Faking It* (2003). Miller divides the book into two main sections, "Close Commentary" and "Extended Themes." Included in the "Close Commentary" are chapters on "The Commitment to Plausibility," "Helping Thorir and Buying the Bear," "Dealing with King Harald," "Giving the Bear to Svein: The Interests in the Bear," "Saying No to Kings," "Eggs in One Basket and Market Value," "Rome: Self-Improvement and Self-Confidence," "Repaying the Bear," and "Back to Harald: The Yielding of Accounts." Included in "Extended Themes" are chapters on "Audun's Luck," "Richness and Risk," "Motives," "Gaming the System: *Gift-Ref*," "Regiving and Reclaiming Gifts," "Gifts Upward: Repaying by Receiving and Funny Money," and "Of Free and Closing Gifts." These two main sections are preceded by an Introduction and a translation of the *þáttr* and followed by a Coda on "The Whiteness of the Bear," a Bibliography, and an Index.

Miller is evidently hoping that readers will be attracted by the title of the book, with its intimation that the bear in the story is a polar bear. Polar bears, as he notes, are much in the news at present: "The plot of the tale actually depends on polar bears being scarce in the medieval Scandinavian world, though their scarcity there arises for rather different reasons than it does among us" (1). This is all very fine and good as a form of advertising, but, to register a plea for philological precision, the *þáttr* at no point actually says that it features a "polar bear." All three extant redactions refer to the creature simply as a bear—*bjarnkýr*—and that despite the fact that a distinct word for "polar bear," namely *hvítabjörn*, literally "white bear," existed in medieval Icelandic. The only other things we know about this bear are that it is *fagr* [fine] (hardly "beautiful," *pace* Miller) and *rauðkinna*, a mysterious descriptor that translates literally as "red-cheek." The suggestion that its cheeks are red because smeared with blood from its latest meal seems feeble and clearly some sustained inquiry into the word is needed. Perhaps a different kind of bear was intended, at least by the redactors of *Flateyjarbók*, where this description uniquely occurs and on which Miller bases his translation and analysis. It is worth keeping in mind that we do not know how far hunters among the Greenlanders ventured in their chase after marketable bears: just within Greenland itself or across the strait to what is now Labrador or

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north-east Quebec? Equally tenuously based is the Coda, which puts this story, with its quite unobtrusive and not necessarily white bear, alongside the much grander epic of *Moby Dick*, with its magnificent white whale.

As noted, Miller bases his discussion of the tale upon the redaction in Flateyjarbók, rather than the versions to be found in the other compilatory manuscripts Morkinskinna and Hulda. The Morkinskinna version has traditionally been preferred by scholars but Miller makes the valid point that terse wording does not necessarily point to greater fidelity to the original. At the same time, as he points out, the relationship of either manuscript to the original is unknowable and accordingly he avoids any assumptions concerning the temporal ordering of the variant versions. The advantage of using Flateyjarbók as a base is that it provides a few crucial, albeit brief, snippets of information, such as the description of the bear mentioned above. One such piece of information that Miller uses to great advantage in his analysis is the statement that Auðunn has supplied the Norwegian trader with reliable advice as to which local Icelanders will be the most creditworthy purchasers of the trader's goods. This means that the willingness of the trader to offer Auðunn not merely passage to Norway but also a further leg to Greenland and return is not some random act of generosity but specifically prompted by the quality of the advice. We might ponder the implications for the social dynamic. Why would the trader be represented as having recourse to Auðunn, a dependent person in another man's household, when the leading persons in the district could have been consulted? Was there special recourse to persons who possessed the gift of *ráð* [effective advice]?

Many other details remain unmentioned or unexplained in any of the versions, so cryptically narrated is the *þáttr*. Miller works hard with the skimpy materials so as to fill in the gaps as best he can and establish a series of plausible motivations running through the story. Typical of this commentary is his shrewd explanation of the fondness of King Haraldr harðráði of Norway for Icelanders: their kindred lay conveniently remote from his power base, making them more dependent on the king himself than a typical Norwegian would be and thus enabling him to keep them in line. While the ultimate veracity of the story, regardless of its degree of realism, is beyond our determination, Miller's expertise on the nuances of gift transactions and his pragmatic sense of the world make the exercise richly worthwhile. He re-thinks and adapts the formulations of Mauss, Bourdieu, Gurevich, and other scholars, as well as applying his own research, so as to bring out the human risks of Auðunn's enterprise—for instance, the momentous consequences if King Sveinn declines to receive the gift—for the benefit of readers whose own cultures operate in very different ways. Parallels and counter-examples from other sagas and *þættir* are introduced along the way, as if in a series of "cases," so as to make these observations graphic and memorable. Anyone who has struggled over the obscurities in Mauss and Bourdieu will come

away from this little book refreshed and enlightened. Naturally there is always the risk of over-rationalization and super-subtlety in handling what may well appear too slight and possibly too fabricated a narrative to bear such an intellectual weight. Miller tries hard, for example, to rationalize the role of Áki, the wicked steward to Sveinn of Denmark, but here we seem to be in the realm of folktale, where stewards are either good (like the one in *Sir Orfeo*) or wicked, and the pursuit of realism is a forlorn enterprise.

Miller also keeps an eye on the practicalities, and in the absence of explicit statements in the narrative guesswork must play a significant part in any explanations. He suggests, for instance, that the logistics of conveying a bear from Greenland to Norway to Denmark would have been less daunting if the bear was only a cub when it began its journey. This could be a valid point, but once one has launched into the discussion of practicalities it becomes hard to know how many factors to take into account. For instance: bears grow fast, they eat voraciously, and strictly speaking they are never fully tamed. No doubt there will have been a medieval science of bear-wrangling that we are not privy to, ensuring that the trophy animals presented to popes and emperors reached their destination in good shape. A suggestion not made by Miller but perhaps worth airing is that the tending to bears in transit might have been largely handled by servants and slaves. Such functionaries are usually invisible in saga narrative, unless the plot calls for their mention, but they might well have played a part in facilitating voyages and travels involving tricky goods. The evidence is that Viking traders and expedition leaders, notably those on the “eastern way,” customarily used them: the portages and transfer of goods necessary on river routes would scarcely have been feasible without such a source of labour.

In his more literary-critical chapters, Miller commendably avoids excesses of structuralism, genre prescription, and over-inclusive comparison of motifs, to be seen in some *þáttr* scholarship. This is not a story that can be simply abstracted as “Icelander meets king” or “trickster makes good.” Nor is it “imitation of Christ.” A few previous scholars have attempted to interpret the *þáttr* exegetically by squeezing significance out of Auðunn’s having “sold all he had” to buy the bear—like the merchant who purchased the pearl of great price in the parable (Matthew 13:44-46)—or by construing the pilgrimage to Rome as the key to some kind of central meaning, but Miller dismisses such explanations, and I think rightly: “the tale does not play by the same rules that govern conventional pious exempla or hagiographical writing, though it may for the purposes of its own complexity and ironic playfulness gesture toward pious themes” (53). If Auðunn is “blessed,” the blessings counted by him would have been of the material kind. The risky and gruelling pilgrimage to Rome can be seen, following Miller’s analysis, as an instance of Auðunn’s “pushing” his luck, cultivating it, extending it into a new realm of endeavour and risk. So happy are his dealings with the two deadly rival kings, Haraldr harðráði of Norway and Sveinn Ástríðarson of Denmark, that

we might wonder if there existed a cultural imperative to respect and assist somebody identified as “lucky.” Perhaps interpellation as a lucky (or unlucky) man by a king or other person of prestige was crucial to the process. Grettir would be the anti-type in this respect, rejected by King Óláfr Haraldsson of Norway for his lack of luck. As well as lucky, Auðunn is cast in the *þáttr* as a classic example of a person placed midway in society who can serve as agent, even if half-unwittingly, for larger processes. Miller analyses with great insight how Sveinn and Haraldr are shown in the *þáttr* using Auðunn’s intrusion into their lives as an adventitious means of mediation and rapprochement. Halli stirði, a poet contemporary with these two kings and evidently uneasy at the excesses of their mutual anger, praises the good service done by people who know how to mediate when they restrain royal antagonism and foster reconciliation (*Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, vol. II.1, 337-43)—advocacy for which Auðunn’s story could serve as an exemplum.

The book should amply succeed in its objective—to interest a readership both within saga studies and in the wider fields of legal and cultural history, anthropology, economic ethnography, sociology, and philosophy. The *þáttr* at its centre should with Miller’s advocacy acquire the wider audience it deserves; it of course needs no advertisement where saga aficionados are concerned. For the most part Miller writes crisply and communicatively, in a relaxed version of academic style, though perhaps readers could have been spared his excursions into Lacanian criticism (57) and etymological free-play (72-73). The book is attractively produced and contains only a minimal number of typographical and other small-scale errors. In sum, we can be grateful to Miller for his acumen, his learning, his tenacity, and (all-important) his clarity in demonstrating that so apparently simple a story can accommodate such a wealth of meaning.

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