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SEX AND THE VERNACULAR IN MEDIEVAL ICELAND

When one considers the theme of this conference, the Icelandic sagas in comparison to medieval literature elsewhere in Europe, the most remarkable general difference is the relative size and variety of the body of serious narrative and intellectual prose produced by thirteenth-century Icelandic literary culture in the vernacular language rather than in Latin. In French and Italian a comparable richness of vernacular prose in contrast to Latin is not to be found before the fourteenth century, and in English not until the fifteenth at the earliest. In France, for example, the thirteenth century witnessed a remarkable development of Arthurian romance in prose, particularly the so-called Vulgate Cycle, but except for the chronicles of Villehardouin and Joinville at the beginning and the end of the century, French prose was limited in both the variety of its literary forms and its intellectual scope. In Italy, Latin held an even more tenacious monopoly on the literary culture of the thirteenth century, allowing significant competition only from the dolce stil nuovo in poetry.

Because literature requires audiences as well as authors, the development of literary prose in Iceland had its roots in all of the cultural institutions that resulted from the country's unique relationship to Britain and the mainland of Europe, not just the literary ones. Specifically, the two institutions that dominated later medieval culture, the Church and the royal courts, had a far more ambiguous influence on cultural life in Iceland at the beginning of the thirteenth century than they did in any other country in Europe. I refer to the Church and Court as social and political institutions, not as shorthand terms for their characteristic modes of thought and aesthetic conventions, whose role in the art of the sagas it will be one of the main purposes of this conference to examine.

Thirteenth-century writers in Iceland were fascinated by the court of Norway and were, of course, the recognized authorities on the history of its foundation and development. Even the Íslendinga sögur, which tell stories about the tenth-century court, explored its nature as a paradigm of the more interesting court of contemporary Norway. Egils saga in particular illustrates this use of an ancient and somewhat primitive royal court, or series of courts, to examine

an institution very much on the mind of its thirteenth-century author. Nor did the saga writers spare the Church as an institution from acute historical analysis. The author of Sverris saga, Abbot Karl Jónsson, although himself a cleric, has left a vivid account of the Norwegian archbishops' lust for power and of their ultimate political ascendancy, through the ceremony of the coronation, over the crown. Abbot Karl was aware that this device for solidifying and sanctioning the interdependence of Church and Court had spread from England to Denmark and hence, within his own lifetime, to Norway.

Learning, piety, manners, art, and power - all were focussed in these two great centralizing institutions, the Church and the Court. And yet, despite this strong attraction, to which all civilized nations had succumbed, the Icelanders had a clear idea at the beginning of the saga-writing period how dangerous both could be. This is the ambiguity, the delicate balance between a retreat into archaic provincialism on one hand and a whole-hearted acceptance of alien hierarchies on the other, that characterized the Icelandic view of contemporary European culture at the beginning of the thirteenth century.

Within this general context I should like to consider briefly the nature of the great Icelandic schools. Whether we think of the school at Haukadal, where Ari Þorgilsson went in 1074 at the age of seven, or Oddi, where Snorri Sturluson went in 1181 at the age of three, we must think of educational establishments much different from similar schools of the same period elsewhere in Europe, whether operated by cathedrals and monasteries or, at the end of our period, incorporated into universities. The general pattern in either case was an exclusively male community composed of boys and men in clerical orders. The earliest stages of the curriculum consisted of Latin grammar and rhetoric, with, of course, Latin literary models.

Writing about this kind of training, Father Walter Ong, S.J., has wittily compared it to the male puberty rites of other cultures.<sup>1</sup> Boys were whipped for making the kind of habitual mistake in Latin grammar or composition that in any other language might lead to neologisms and linguistic change. The essence of Latin and of the idealized Rome of medieval Latin culture was that it was eternal and unchanging. It was also stridently masculine in its outlook, teaching the stoical and militaristic virtues of Latin antiquity. if not the outright anti-feminism so common in medieval

authors of even the greatest wit and learning. The aim of the Latin schools was, in Father Ong's view, to wean the young men away from the corrupt and mutable world of the feminine and to initiate them into the changeless masculine world of eternal Rome. The vernacular languages, consigned by the medieval educational system to the kitchen, the nursery, and other domains of womenfolk, are notorious for their willingness to admit the poor usage and corruptions that lead in time to linguistic change. They are likewise capable of expressing ideas that may not always correspond to those Latin ideas whose theological status has been established.

A number of institutional forces and happy circumstances conspired against the establishment of typical European schools in Iceland. When I try to imagine the atmosphere at Haukadal and Oddi two things particularly impress me. First, the priests and prelates who lived on these large farming estates were the sons and fathers of the secular chieftains who actually owned the schools and church buildings personally. Secondly, the clergy were usually married men. They could not or did not wish to segregate themselves from the kitchen or the nursery any more than from the law courts and great gatherings of men. One could say, as contemporary

European observers did, either that Iceland was a country so pious that everyone obeyed the bishops or that it was so sunk in iniquity that its bishops were made to obey the higher secular authority. Leaving aside the moral conclusions, both views were correct because the two authorities, secular and ecclesiastical, were bound by ties of filial and fraternal love.

How on these large family estates could the seven-year-old Ari or the three-year-old Snorri escape the attention of women? How, too, could they fail to receive - or at least be exposed to - the comprehensive education that trained the leaders capable of conducting important law suits, of making their way in the seats of power abroad, of expounding a Latin text or a vernacular verse in whose ancient rhythms some sacred or historical truth lay hidden? The news of the day as well as the traditions of the past were as integral a part of their education as the reading of Latin texts, and for these they depended as much upon the women of the estate as the men. Since the family was the basis not only of Icelandic politics and economics but to a large extent of its intellectual leadership as well, not too many men could afford to be without wives. Sexual love as well as the normal intimacies and affections of family life were a common experience of

Icelandic intellectuals in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as was the constant exposure to the vernacular language which necessarily follows from that fact.

The earliest schools in Iceland, which first taught reading and writing, were in all likelihood based on the common European model. The men who according to the First Grammatical Treatise first wrote down the Icelandic laws, genealogies, and sacred translations in the Icelandic language would have learned the art of writing with ink on vellum by copying Latin texts. For some years, therefore, Iceland experienced a cultural situation that had been common all over medieval Europe: the vernacular language, traditions, and verbal art were oral, while Latin was the language of writing. The most famous story illustrative of this situation is Bede's account of the Anglo-Saxon poet Cædmon, who was taught to sing the traditional oral poetry in a dream and then went on to compose paraphrases of the Bible as it was translated for him by the monks at Whitby. Bede's story took place five centuries earlier than the time we have been considering in Iceland. It is quite possible that Anglo-Saxon England at that time had as frank and open relationship between the sexes among its intellectual leaders as Iceland did later on, for the moving force in the effort of converting

Latin scripture to vernacular poetry according to Bede's account was a woman, the Abbess Hild, clearly a person able to understand the scriptures in Latin herself but at the same time eager to have them available to those who could not.

That the earliest literary activity in Iceland was in Latin is quite clear, therefore, from a great many pieces of evidence. But by the middle of the twelfth century considerable progress had been made both in supplying translations of influential books and in setting down directly into Icelandic the knowledge and experience that had hitherto existed only orally. In this latter process it is also clear that women played an important role. One of Ari Þorgilsson's sources of information in the writing of Íslendingabók was Þuríðr, the daughter of Snorri goði.<sup>2</sup> She remembered her father well, and he had been thirty-five years old at the time of the Conversion. This kind of vernacular tradition, passed on by women of intelligence and retentive memory, would not have been possible if the normal sexually segregated Latin-school pattern elsewhere in Europe had prevailed in Icelandic education.

More striking and convincing is the complex instance of Gunnlaugr Leifsson's Latin life of Óláfr Tryggvason, in which he states his indebtedness to six



informants, three of them men and three women.<sup>3</sup> It illustrates the process that must increasingly have seemed wasteful: taking down notes from oral informants in the vernacular, writing out the work in Latin, and then having the work translated back into Icelandic. But even in this awkward transitional period the testimony and traditions preserved by women were crucial to the development of Icelandic historiography.

An apparently harmonious and productive relationship between the sexes in Icelandic cultural life of the Commonwealth period had consequences not just for the language of the sagas but for their view of the relations between the sexes in general. In fact, much of the vernacular literature of medieval Europe depends upon a significant cultural role being played by women, as patronesses, inspirers, and audiences, if not as teachers and authoresses. One thinks, for example, of the courtly audience of Chrétien's verse narratives, not to mention the later and more obvious instances of Petrarch and Boccaccio. A revolution in sensibility as profound as the one created by Chrétien and his followers does not take place in a vacuum. An audience had to be ready for it, had to have anticipated and in a sense created a potential for responding to it. We can think of this audience as one significantly influenced by women who

had in some strange fashion been recently liberated and empowered. I see no reason for revising the conventional view of the French situation expressed many years ago by James Douglas Bruce in his Evolution of Arthurian Romance:

As long as facility in reading was confined to a few and even members of the higher classes were mainly dependent on being read aloud to, the traditional form of narrative - namely, verse - was not likely to yield ground; but as soon as a knowledge of reading became more general and people no longer dependent on professional reciters, the superior attraction of prose for many who were interested in these stories of love and adventure would be sure to make itself felt. What is here said applies, of course, especially to women who must have constituted the majority of the romance-writer's clientèle.<sup>4</sup>

Not only the fact of women in the audience but the nature of their education is reflected in the various forms of narrative art. Bruce stresses the role of the educated woman as an audience, while I am exploring the significance of educated women as suppliers of tradition. But the two roles are in practice not mutually exclusive. By giving a prominent place in society to talented and

energetic women, thirteenth-century Iceland anticipated more nearly the Renaissance than it resembled the culture of the medieval Court. And it signalled this fact by writing for and about women in a language that the Church and its schools had relegated as their special preserve.

While one may resist the temptation to speak of the authoress of Laxdoela saga, it is proper to suggest that women played a part in preserving the stories on which it is based and that there are aspects of the saga that the women of Iceland need not necessarily have had to learn from their sisters over the seas in the courts of France. One such element is the social stature of Unnr in *djúpúðga* and the private relationship of tenderness and authority that existed between Óláfr feilan and her. This relationship is recapitulated in Höskuldr and his mother, and again in the remarkable scene when Höskuldr discovers Óláfr pái learning what was literally his mother tongue from Melkorka.

The image of the mother secretly breaking her habitual silence in order to pass on the knowledge of her native language to her son profoundly illustrates the argument of this paper. By segregating the sexes educationally and linguistically and by heroically striving against the most powerful laws of human nature

to enforce clerical celibacy, the medieval Church in Europe was making impossible the cultural role of women that was so highly prized and so movingly represented by the author of Laxdoela saga. Those handsome, gifted men of Laxdoela saga repaid the strength of their mothers with a masculine tenderness that is richer and more human in conception than either the fin amour of the romances or its idealization in Dante's feelings for Beatrice. Almost as remarkable as the scene in which Melkorka is discovered talking to her son in Irish is Óláfr pái's setting Melkorka's foster-mother on his knee when they meet in Ireland. The whole atmosphere of the saga has prepared us to recognize the wonder and profundity of this image in which the truly civilized man transmits a familial affection from one woman to another, transcending the differences between generations, sexes, and cultures. It is not easy to imagine a context in which this image would be appropriate outside of the sagas.

This pattern of maternal strength and filial affection may be a modern psycho-analyst's nightmare, especially since it is accompanied in Laxdoela saga by a female wilfulness, not to say bitchiness, that is epitomized in a small way when Vigdís hits Ingjaldr in the nose with a purse full of money, and in a large

way in Guðrún's relationship to Kjartan and her husbands on the one hand and her own sons on the other. But it is a pattern that we have no trouble accepting in a saga, because men and women are in fact that way. That this view of human nature in Laxdoela saga draws upon a peculiarly feminine wisdom cannot be proved in quite the same way as Ari's dependence on Puriðr or Gunnlaugr's on his three women. It has about it the aura of a culture that was willing to think deeply and honestly in its narrative art not only about legal, political, and ecclesiastical institutions but also about the relationship between the sexes in their most dangerous and attractive aspects.

In contrast, the literature of the Church and of the Court embodied partial visions. In neither was woman the social partner of man that she was described as being in the greatest narratives of medieval Iceland. Speaking broadly, she was, in the literature of Church and Court, either a sinner or a saint, a goal toward which man tended, to his joy or his sorrow. In Icelandic narrative, she had a will of her own, one that was conditioned significantly by her total social and psychological role - as wife, mother, daughter, teacher, servant, mistress ... woman's work is never done. Until the Icelandic Commonwealth, through its own

exhaustion and its aspiration for what it conceived to be higher and more modern cultural ideals, surrendered to the Church and the Court as controlling influences on its cultural life, the saga writers wrote for and about women who had never been in need either of liberation or of their own special kind of authors. For who had taught the saga writers their language and their stories while the monks were teaching them how to write?

## NOTES

1. "Latin Language Study as a Renaissance Puberty Rite", Studies in Philology LVI (1959), 103-24.
2. Described in the first sentence of the first chapter of Íslendingabók as "bæði margspök ok óljúgfróð".
3. They are listed at the end of Chapter 81 in the Icelandic translation, which appears as an appendix to the Icelandic version of Oddr the Monk's Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in Guðni Jónsson's edition (Íslendingasagnaútgáfan).
4. (Göttingen, 1923), I, 365-6.