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MORAL VALUES IN THE SAGAS (SUMMARY)

A particularly active area of saga research in recent years is that of "saga morality". A number of books and articles from the late 60's and early 70's (by a truly international set of authors), dealing with such questions as ethical norms, the sagas' moral rhetoric, the place of the heroic ethic, and the relevance of Christian and pagan values testify to a considerable amount of re-thinking on this subject. It might therefore be appropriate to pause and examine this activity in order to determine where we are and where we are going. If, as is likely, we are going in several directions at once, then some attempt must be made to determine which ones seem most worth pursuing.

It is interesting to observe that in most cases these recent re-examinations of saga ethics are an outgrowth of a more general re-evaluation of the sagas, especially with regard for their external connections and contact with foreign currents. We have come a long way from the days when it was possible to say of the sagas that "these Norse compositions belong to the Middle Ages only in time; for they were uninfluenced either by Christianity or the antique culture, the formative elements of mediaeval development."¹⁾ Although one occasionally still runs across similar sentiments,²⁾ it is fair to say that they have

1) Henry Osborn Taylor, The Mediaeval Mind (4th ed. London, 1925), vol. I, p. 167.

2) Peter Hallberg, for example, writes in his book (The Icelandic Saga, tr. Paul Schach, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1962, p. 1) about the sagas' "complete absence of any definite points of contact with other literatures."

been largely abandoned in favor of a new conception in which the Icelandic sagas are seen in their medieval European context, and which recognizes the manifold connections between Icelandic sagas and medieval historiography, Christian hagiography, continental romance, medieval and classical Latin works, religious translations and the like.

It is also true that advances made in our understanding of the old problems of saga origins, of saga style or "rhetoric", of the historicity of the sagas, and of their literary connections have laid the foundation for a re-interpretation of the sagas' moral import. As long as the sagas were considered, for example, as objective, historically accurate reports of actual events from the "Saga Age", there was little interest in exploring saga ethics, since this neutral recording of history would preclude to a large extent the possibility of a moral message. The sagas were, so to speak, beyond good and evil, "absolute prose"; there was no "moral superstructure" in them, a unique situation in an age of such widespread didacticism.

But as faith in the historical trustworthiness of the sagas was broken down by historians like Lauritz Weibull and literary scholars such as Sigurður Nordal, the corollary view that the sagas are fictional pieces of literature -- works of art -- began to take hold. Today this is without a doubt the dominant view, and within it there is likely to be more room to accommodate an author's moral viewpoint, a moral superstructure.

The discrediting of the historical aspect of the sagas has been accompanied by a corresponding loss of faith in their oral origins. Again and again scholars have shown that the sagas are not scribal copies of ancient oral stories but rather products of thirteenth-century literary consciousness, premeditated works of distinctively individual authors. The effect this re-thinking has on a study of moral values is to remind us that what we encounter in an Icelandic saga is just as likely to reveal thirteenth-

century (Christian) influence as pagan Germanic, for in the thirteenth century Iceland was a part of the Christian community of Western Europe and shared in the learning of the time.

One of the major differences between recent scholarship on the subject of saga morality and what might loosely be termed "the old view" concerns the sagas' evaluation of honor and heroism. In the old view (e.g. Walther Gehr) it is usually assumed that the sagas in their "neutrality" do not condemn the overbearing man on moral grounds, since pride is a legitimate part of the pagan value system which the sagas are held to embody. Modern research is almost unanimous in rejecting this view; one of the conclusions shared by such diverse authors as T.M. Andersson, Lars Lönnroth, and Hermann Pálsson is that the sagas condemn personal pride (at least in its inflexible form) and celebrate the virtue of moderation. It seems clear now that reconciliation and social harmony are among the chief ideals embodied in the sagas rather than individual heroism and clan loyalty. It is further probable that the sagas' interest in peacemaking is a reflection of thirteenth-century concerns, an attempt to deal with the brutality of the so-called Sturlung Age.

Beyond such basic agreement, however, modern researches such as those of Andersson,³⁾ Lönnroth,⁴⁾ and Pálsson⁵⁾ reveal considerably different methods and conclusions. While Andersson does not consider the "displacement" of the heroic ethic a specifically Christian accomplishment, Lönnroth treats it as part of a thirteenth-century Christian attempt to find common ground between the old and the new, and Pálsson firmly rejects the notion that there

3) T.M. Andersson, "The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas," Speculum 45 (1970), pp. 575-593.

4) Lars Lönnroth, "The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas," Scandinavian Studies 41 (1969), pp. 1-29.

5) Hermann Pálsson, Art and Ethics in Hrafnkel's Saga (Copenhagen, 1971).

was any continuity from pagan values to thirteenth-century concerns. Whereas Andersson documents his notion of social accommodation by citing the Eddaic Hávamál, Lönnroth finds moderation supported in the thirteenth-century Norwegian Konungs skuggsjá, and Pálsson makes considerable use of foreign theological sources such as Hugh of St. Victor, Augustine, as well as the Bible itself, in his re-interpretation of Hrafnkel's Saga as a Christian parable (or, more accurately, a series of parables).

To my mind the choice of Hávamál to illuminate morality in the sagas is a risky one, and Andersson's re-interpretation of Hávamál ethics is not wholly convincing. It seems that the moral precepts embodied in this poem are either so general or else mutually contradictory (probably because of the eclectic nature of this tradition) that its value as a source of moral edification is extremely limited. Hávamál can in fact be used to support widely divergent conclusions. It seems further unwise to minimize the immense role that the new religion must have played in the struggle against the feud mentality. Surely the concept of moderation, as expressed in a thirteenth-century saga, must owe a great deal to the Christian notion of temperantia.

On the other hand if one accepts saga morality as a reflection of Christian sentiment, there arises the problem of defining what we mean by "Christian". To what degree is the Konungs skuggsjá typical of thirteenth-century Christian thought in the North? The advice of the father in this treatise is specifically contradicted, for example, in the Norwegian translation of Alcuin's De Virtutibus et Vitiis from about the same time.

The difficulty in finding appropriate yardsticks by which to measure moral acts in the sagas is further illustrated by the problematical analysis of Hrafnkel's saga in Pálsson's works. To break up an Icelandic saga into a series of moral issues and attempt to interpret them piecemeal in the light of various foreign sources

does not seem a very profitable way to proceed. In considering, for example, Pálsson's use of John of Salisbury one must ask first whether John was known on Iceland, whether his notion of tyrannicide was typical of medieval thought, and finally whether an Icelandic saga author would necessarily attribute Christian reasoning and modes of behavior to his characters. Nor should we forget that it is usually a better practice to proceed from a close reading of the text itself rather than bringing in criteria from the outside. The moral standards used to interpret an Icelandic saga should originate within the work, though other closely related documents such as the Postola sögur and the Heilagra manna sögur can be of great interest in this connection.

Yet we must not lose sight of the fact that the sagas are not theological treatises but imaginative narrative treatments of the past: an attempt by thirteenth-century Icelanders to come to terms with both their ancestors and themselves. It is within this remarkable sense of historical perspective that the moral values of the Icelandic sagas are best understood. The ethical system one encounters is neither a tenth-century one nor a thirteenth-century one, but is, at least in part, a thirteenth-century conception of an earlier age in terms of a later. This intersection goes far toward explaining such interesting hallmarks of the sagas as the interplay of fate and free will, blood feud and reconciliation, violence and moderation. It may also help to account for the fact that all sagas do not show an equal interest in moral questions nor emphasize the same values. (There are other criteria by which behavior is also evaluated in the sagas.) Since, then, the sagas attempt to present a complex view of human behaviour, the scholar should not limit his field of vision by the assumption of a single explanatory tool.