

SOME OBSERVATIONS REGARDING NARRATIVE PATTERNS IN THE MEDIEVAL SAGAS OF HOLY MAIDS

Birte CARLE

The aim of this paper is to present a few narrative aspects connected with the sagas of holy maids. The paper suggests that the sagas of female saints, written down in Old Norse before the family sagas, are examined in the light of women's socio-sexual roles. The paper points to the fact that a private socio-sexual conflict is interwoven with the religious combat between Christianity and paganism, and that the sagas of holy maids which were introduced into Old Norse literature represented a modification of an earlier type of a maid's saga, represented by the legend of Thecla (2nd cent.).

As my endeavours to widen the philological basis of the editions of C.R.Unger are not yet completed, I leave the paper in its original, oral form. It may be read as a contribution to the attempts to define the typology of medieval hagiography, and - like the paper of Régis Boyer at the Odense symposium 1980 - it focuses on temporal aspects, spatial aspects, and the character of the hero in the saints' sagas.

Thanks to the Handlist : The Lives of the Saints in Old Norse Prose, worked out by Widding, Bekker-Nielsen, and Shook in 1963¹, it is possible to obtain a survey of what is left over of the hagiographic literature of medieval Scandinavia. The handlist is supposed to hold a complete record of the hagiographic materials deriving from medieval documents and written in Old Norse prose.

In addition to this interest in establishing the basic knowledge of medieval Scandinavian hagiography a few important specimens of editorial work must be mentioned : In 1877 C.R.Unger published two volumes of *Heilagra manna sögur*, stories and legends of holy men and women². Unger's main source was the manuscript of the Royal Library of Stockholm, Stockholm K 2 in folio, edited in facsimile by Peter Foote in 1962³. In his presentation of the achievements of the scholarly research into Old Norse Saints' Lives, Thorsten Carlsson, in 1972, comments on the editorial results and he comes to the following conclusion : The work of Unger must be continued. New textcritical editions are being published ; a scientific dictionary is in preparation in Copenhagen.⁴

And Carlsson feels convinced that the philological examination of the manuscripts must be considered the most important and the most fruitful part of the scholarly research.

However - closely connected with the philological investigations is the study of the style of the hagiographic texts, and the description of the principles which the various translators have followed. According to Widding and Bekker-Nielsen, the translators of the earliest period - from about 1150 - wrote in a rather simple style, hardly influenced by the Latin of the original text ; later on a more ornamented and artificial way of writing came to dominate the translations.

This preoccupation with the philological and the stylistic characteristics of the Old Norse saints' lives was due to the fact that the oldest of these narratives were probably written down before the Icelandic sagas. I would like here to draw the attention to the well-known wording of Turville-Petre, in 1953 : The Icelanders learned from the saints' lives and the homilies, how biographies and wondertales could be written in books... The learned literature did not teach the Icelanders what to think or what to say, but it taught them how to say it.⁶

Primarily concerned with the literary form of the medieval saints' lives was the dissertation of Tue Gad, from 1961⁷. This book was a consistent attempt to describe saints' lives as literature ; this meant a break with the Bollandists' tradition, that is concerned with the isolation of the historical core of the Christian narratives. In the recent history of literature, for instance the exposition of the late Knud Togeby in "The History of European Literature"⁸, the description of the saints' lives is given an important part because of the role these narratives played in the medieval society, not only as edifying literature, but also as supplying the demand for entertainment, sentiment, horror stories, and maybe even pornography.

Opinions of the literary value of the saints' lives have almost unanimously been moderate, not to say negative. In the twenties, Finnur Jonsson⁹ stated the harmful influence of the saints' sagas on the Icelandic people, and underlined the narrowmindedness of the genre. His conclusion was that the whole thing is for the most part boring and stereotype. Thirty years later, Turville-Petre advanced the same opinion, but in a modified form : "The saints' lives... are not among the best or the most interesting of Icelandic literature".^{9a}

No doubt, saints' lives are stereotype : no wonder therefore, that attempts have been made to provide a coherent description of these stereotypes. May I mention the dissertation of the Norwegian Jostein Børtnes¹⁰ on the Russian saint's life, inspired from the linguistic theories of Roman Jakobson ; and likewise draw the attention to the lecture of Régis Boyer at the symposium on "Hagiography and Medieval Literature" in Odense 1980 : An attempt to define the typology of medieval hagiography.¹¹

What I am going to say in the following represents some of my own ideas about how to isolate and define the above mentioned stereotypes ; there is reason to believe, that isolation and definition of invariable elements of the texts will create a basis for the establishing of a

description of the genre.

The object I have chosen for description is made up of the saints' lives designated in *Biblioteca Hagiographica Latina* and elsewhere as "passio virginis". I confine my description to the entire, not fragmentary, specimens left in Old Norse prose. This means the virgins' sagas that occur in the manuscript Stockholm K 2, edited by Foote in facsimile, in AM 429, and in AM 435. All of them are printed in the 1877 - edition of Unger, a reproduction which Peter Foote describes as in general extremely accurate.

To isolate narratives of females saints is to follow a medieval tradition. As a matter of fact, as Guy Philippart¹², points out the Latin manuscripts in which male and female saints are kept separate, outnumber the ones in which a division between martyrs and confessors is the compositional principle. In Stockholm K 2 the intention of keeping female saints in a separate group is manifest, for the sagas of Mary of Egypt, Martha and Mary Magdalene, Catherine, Barbara, Lucy, Caecilia, Agatha, and Agnes occur in immediate succession.

In the following I intend to contribute to the description of the sagas of the holy maids by discussion mainly two problems : First, I will deal with the composition or the narrative structure of the sagas, by taking into consideration the temporal and the spatial aspects of the texts ; secondly, on the basis of the previous observations, I will discuss the representation of the hero of the sagas.

In the Old Norse sagas of virgins, various temporal aspects play a part in the composition. The first and very rough segmentation of the texts I am going to establish is the one between on the one hand the course of events - what Gérard Genette refers to as "l'histoire" - and on the other hand indications of the communication situation. Elements that indicate the communication situation are for the most part found at the beginning and at the end of the saga. The story-teller refers to a person from the early history of Christianity, probably in order to provide an impression of authenticity and trustworthiness ; be it the famous Church father Ambrose, or some unknown scribe named Theophilus or Athanasius. In this way a temporal aspect of the past is created, which differs from the moment in which the saga is narrated, or better, re-produced. The same feeling of two distinguished aspects of time is created when the narrator refers to former times, before the Christian cult was legalized in Iceland. I would like to mention one example from the saga of Caecilia : two miracles are recorded at the end of the saga, and both of them take place at Húsafell in Borgarfjörður, with Brandr Þorarinsson and his mother Guðrún Ospaksdóttir, both of them well-known characters in the *Laxdoela-saga*. These miracles occur only in Stockholm K 2, I will quote the beginning of the first one in order to give an impression of the temporal aspects : A man was called Þorgils ; he had his leg severely damaged. And when he told that he was suffering from pain in his knee, the doctors burnt him with iron

under his knee cap, and much matter came out. Then he was put into a tub, and a big hole was cut in his leg, and he said that he felt an awful pain, and his leg began to swell. When he stood up on his sound foot, the toes of the sore foot began to swell equally. Then he was brought to Húsafell, to the place of Þórarinn and Brandr, for he was a relative of theirs. He arrived a few nights before the feast day of Caecilia. Guðrún Óspaksdóttir, the mother of Brandr, truly held Caecilia in veneration ; she celebrated her feast day and fasted before it. At that time - these words mark the temporal aspect - the day of Caecilia was not yet legalized as a church festival. They had to celebrate Mass themselves, for in those days - again a temporal aspect - there was no legal chaplain in that place. Needless to tell that the leg of Þorgils was healed ; but it is useful to state that the remarks above lead us to the conclusion that the present moment of the reproduction or the re-telling of the saga, must be distinguished from two aspects of past time : one of them is the historical period of the persecutions and the early days of the establishment of the Church, when the saga was originally created ; the other one is the historical period before the official legalization of the Christian cult in Iceland.

Probably more important to both the story-teller and the readers or the listeners has been a different aspect of time : the aspect of eternity, or the end of time. Eternity indicates the world of God, in which the saint is received, and from where she acts. The link between men and women on the one hand, and the healing and helpful strength of the saint on the other hand, is the saga itself. The connection is established whenever the saga is told or re-told, for the listener who follows the course of events also follows the saint's passing into the temporal aspect of eternity.

This magic effect of the narrative is not confined to the intellectual experience of the text ; the presence of the concrete saga-manuscript or saga-book may connect a human being with divinity just as efficiently. The following statements concerning the power of the saga-writing itself are taken from Margaret's saga ; they form part of the prayers which Margaret says right before her death :

... he who creates a memorial of my sufferings or has in his hands the book in which my passio is written, may his sins be washed away...

And : ... he who writes my passio or buys the book, may he be filled with the holy Spirit...

And in the house where my book is present, may there be born no dead or paralysed child. - And finally : Forgive the man his sins... he who is to take care of my book.

Summing up we can state that the sagas of the holy maids provided the Icelanders with new temporal aspects : firstly, they drew their attention to the historical timereckoning set up by the Church ; secondly, they presented to the Icelanders a cycle of the year which was based upon Church festivals, and which replaced the former annual cycle that was rooted in the natural seasons and the economic activities ; and, finally, the

sagas taught the Icelanders that the span of everlasting time would not be passed with Óðinn in Ásgarðr, but with God Almighty in heaven.

I do not doubt that Turville-Petre rightly stated that the translations of the learned literature taught the Icelanders to write in their own language ; in Turville-Petre's wording : they taught them how to say it. But I feel less convinced that he was right when he stated, that this literature did not teach the Icelanders' what to think or what to say.

I shall now pass on to a discussion of the spatial aspects of the sagas. In his Attempt to define the typology of medieval hagiography - published in 1981 - Régis Boyer treated the genre of the *vita* and stated that the landscape is not a constitutive part of the tale ; and that in the *vita*, we have to do with a nearly irrelevant scenery. In the martyrs, sagas of virgins conditions are different : here the places do reflect principles of composition.

Speaking about places, I might mention first of all the widening geographical horizon of the Icelanders that must have been the result of reading or listening to narratives that took place in Egypt, in the Holy Land, in Minor Asia, Sicily or in Rome. But that goes without saying. More interesting is the fact that the changing landscapes, or the various settings, as we might as well call them -for we have to do with more or less fixed sceneries - intimately correspond to segments of the course of events.

Let us have a look at the segments of the sagas and the corresponding sceneries.

In the first phase of the saga there is no specific setting. The initial conflict dominates the description, and the problems have their root in a disagreement as to the socio-sexual role of a girl of marriageable age. In other words, the situation at the beginning of a virgin's saga is, that a man desires a maid, who, for her part, has made up her mind to remain a virgin.

Let me mention a few examples to illustrate this situation : In the saga of Agnes the conflict breaks out when the girl is thirteen. The son of the burgomaster - and now I am quoting the saga - made her an offer of marriage, and he promised her as well as her family many presents, and he displayed various articles of value.

The maid, however, stayed cool and distant. - Another virgin's saga tells that the Earl of Sicily learned about the good points of young Agatha. The text reads : He asked the advice of many people to find out, how he would be able to get possession of her.

Agatha belonged to a distinguished family, and the man considered, that an alliance with her would satisfy his socio-economic ambition as well as his sexual desires. - A variation of this initial conflict-situation is represented in the saga of Barbara ; here the maid's father has a tower built, in order to have his daughter locked up in it, "so that men could not see her in her beauty ; for he was jealous".

The saga of the fifteen years old Margaret says that Margaret was brought up in the house of a strange woman, for her mother had died, and

her father did not want to take care of her. The girl was tending sheep, and one day the local governor set his heart on her. The saga words the situation as follows : "Go up to this maid, he told his men, and ask her, whether she is free or not. And if she is free, I want to possess her. And is she is not, I will buy her and she shall be my mistress ; for she is more beautiful than most other women".

In order to understand the sort of conflict described in the above given quotations, it is necessary to keep in mind the social position of women in the Roman Empire, since this is the society in which these sagas of martyrs came into being. Admittedly, customary law, as well as written law gave women a freer position than was the case in the period of the Republic. However, as her father's daughter, or her husband's wife, a woman was submitted to the authority of the *patria potestas*, the male power that governed the family¹³. And however intelligent or well-educated she was, she would never be able to hold an official post. A woman, when sexually mature, was supposed to marry. Marriage, in its various forms, provided the social framework for her sexual life. The virgins' sagas, without exception, expose an initial conflict that arises because a young woman refuses to accept the conditions of married life. This is why it is reasonable to define the social existence of the women in the sagas of female saints on the basis of the notion of "femininity", of which the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the following explanation : the quality or nature of the feminine sex, and notes as first usage : Coleridge, 1820. Since then, the term has been re-coined by modern scholars of literature and anthropology¹⁴.

Let me go back to the relation between the scenery and the composition of the saga. After the initial phase of the narrative, the above mentioned socio-sexual conflict between two people - who both of them act as private people - invariably develops. He offers money, jewelry, houses, and the social prestige of marriage - she stays cool. But her situation is embarrassing. Margaret describes this in the following words in her prayer to God : "Now I feel like a sheep among wolves, captive like a fish in the net". And in AM 233 fol. is added : "Like the bird in a snare". At this moment the scenery of the virgin's saga changes, for the girl is brought before the court of law. The conflict is no longer a private controversy concerning socio-sexual roles, but an official clash between the Roman and the Christian power. The scenery of the Law-court is made up of various localities, connected in different ways with the characters of the saga. The judge's seat is occupied by the rejected suitor himself, or by a judge whom he has involved in the case. The court also includes a torture-chamber with its staff, and - not far away - the square where the executioner acts. The famous discussions where the representative of Christianity displays her rhetorical capacities, her sense of logic, as well as her personal arrogance and her firm belief in God, take place before the court of justice.

In between the interrogations and the torture, the virgin stays in

prison, a locality always referred to as "the room of darkness". This is the place where the representative of the Christian power appears. He may have the shape of an old man who emerges at midnight to comfort the prisoner and to heal her wounds.

Another important locality is the house of ill fame. It is the place where the rejected suitor hopes to have the obstinacy of the maid broken ; but imprisonment in a brothel also occurs as a punishment for disobedience to Roman law. Descriptions of happenings inside or outside the brothel provide a welcome break of the abstract monotony of the virgin's saga ; they may even hold a glimpse of a popular and coarse sense of humour, based on an exaggeration of the contrast between the strength of maidenhood, and the force of men. As an illustration can be mentioned the situation in the saga of Lucy, where the male protagonist gets angry because the maid obstinately defends the sovereignty of spiritual life. So he delivers her into the hands of men who earn their living as brothel-keepers, and ask them to have her violated till she dies. But when they are about to take her to the brothel, they cannot possibly move her, nor even touch her. They put her in irons, and a large group of men try to drag her away, but all in vain : the maid is as immovable as a mountain. The Roman official now has her poured over with urine - that was supposed to be a remedy for witchcraft - and he sends for a team of oxen to get her moved ; without result. For this is not witchcraft, it is the force of God and virginity. The Roman official is now so tormented by his loss of prestige that he starts crying - only to realize that he is made the laughing stock of the crowd.

However, in nearly all the virgins' sagas here mentioned, after passages of carefully described torture, and detailed discussions of the superiority of the Christian divinity to the Roman idols, the sword of the executioner fulfils the task, and the maid follows the voice that calls from heaven.

The last of the recurrent settings of the virgins' sagas is the burial place. In this place a young man, with his suite of two hundred men, may appear, all of them stately dressed; according to the narrator it is impossible to understand from where they come, and it goes without saying that to the medieval reader or listener, the association to a wedding procession has been near at hand.

After the burial, carefully undertaken by Christian men, the scenery takes on a completely different character. Up till the final phase of the saga, settings appeared to represent such urban localities as were the concrete manifestation of the social institution of the family, where the private, customary law rules ; and of the law-court, where civil law is administered. But after the death of the maid, the horizon widens immensely, and the incidents can be located everywhere in the universe : somewhere up in the mountains, in the torrential stream of a river, on the volcano of Etna while in eruption, high up in the air at midnight, etc. The

concluding parts of the virgins' sagas know no limitation, neither for space, nor for time. For the final phase of the narrative represents the victory of God.

This victory has two main ways of manifesting itself. On the one hand the saint, now the bride of Christ, is given the power to improve the conditions of those who call upon her, wheresoever they are and whatsoever is the force that is threatening them. On the other hand, the saint's male antagonist is annihilated, maybe burnt by a fire from heaven and his ashes scattered to the four winds, maybe drowned in the torrential stream and his dead body vanished without a trace.

As a result of this discussion of the spatial aspects of the virgins' sagas, we can now state, that the sagas are stereotype as far as the course of events is concerned : First, an initial conflict concerning the socio-sexual role of the maid, followed by an escalation of this conflict on the level of private life. Subsequently, an expansion to the level of officialdom, and - after the death of the maid - manifestations of the divine Christian sovereignty.

In the following I am going to use the above given considerations of the narrative patterns of the virgins' sagas as the basis for a discussion of the hero of the texts.

Apparently, there is no doubt as to who is meant to be the hero of the narrative ; the narrator clearly takes the side of the maid who is said to be not only beautiful, but also pious and devoted. The course of events shows that she is firm, patient, and willing to suffer. Facing her, stands the male protagonist, who is represented as a victim to his sensual pleasures, keen on demonstrating his power, furious if he does not succeed, and used to act violently to attend his object. In a popular story like the saint's saga there must be one character, whom the readers and listeners can follow wholeheartedly. He or she may pass through many unpleasant situations, and may undergo much suffering - on the condition that there is a happy ending. Similarly, the villain may play all his dirty tricks, provided he is properly punished in the end.

We have seen that the syntactic structure underlying the narrative discourse of the Old Norse virgins' sagas is very general in character : an initial social situation is replaced by a different one at the final phase ; the conflict arises in private life, but finds its solution in public ; finally the whole universe is embraced. We can refer to this syntactic structure as a narrative pattern which constitutes the genre of the virgin's saga. If we want to discuss the hero of the saga in relation to this narrative pattern, we have to turn the attention to the social manifestations of the femineity of the female protagonist. We can do this by asking questions like : Is she inside or outside the *patria potestas* ? And : Is she the daughter of a man, or the wife of one ? Is she sexually connected with a man, or with men ; or is she not ?

As for the old Norse virgins' sagas the answer is, that, at the

beginning of the saga, the maid is normally found to be in a situation of social independence, a situation which, by the way, recalls the legal conditions of the widow. After the happy ending, her social existence is different, she is firmly anchored in a relation to God. This relation is alluded to unambiguously as marriage.

However, it must be emphasized that, at the same time as the syntactic structure itself appears to be a constitutive part of the virgin's saga the social manifestations of femineity that are displayed in the initial and the final situation respectively, are not necessarily the same in all virgins' sagas, but are exchangeable elements.

This will be evident when we devote our attention to specimens of virgins' sagas which were not translated into Old Norse. If we take the narrative of Saint Thecla as an example, which is labeled in the *Biblioteca Hagiografica Latina* as a *passio virginis*, we can observe a course of events that takes the woman from an initial position where she is engaged to be married, and after the court case leaves her in an independent social existence, peace-fully working with her Christian brothers and sisters. Thus we are lead to the observation that the underlying syntactic structure of the passions of virgins appears to be fixed, but that the social manifestations of femineity in the various phases of the narrative, vary. These variations are due to historical and cultural circumstances. A discussion of the hero of the virgin's saga further demands attention to the forces that interact in the various phases of the narrative. One way of grasping these forces, and the direction they take, is to isolate the parts of the text that describe the attempt for one of the characters to obtain a change of given conditions. Then questions like the following must be asked: who desires the change; which is the motive power, and how is the starting position? What sort of action does the agent perform? What kinds of opposition does he or she experience and what kinds of support? And how far are the intentions realized?

If we ask this sort of questions, concerning action performed with the intention of bringing about a change of conditions, to the Old Norse virgins' sagas, we realize that the initiator of the project is the male protagonist; he desires to put an end to the maid's social existence as a virgin - and he succeeds.

May I again call the attention to the older *passio virginis*, by referring to the narrative of Saint Thecla. Thecla is herself the initiator of the attempt to obtain a change of conditions. She desires a responsible position in society, away from the *potestas* of a husband. And she is successful. Male protagonists try to cross her plans, by marriage or by rape; but they fail.

We can now state, that what is labeled in the *Biblioteca Hagiografica Latina* as "*passio virginis*" can be characterized by its underlying syntactic structure; the saint is determined by the social manifestations of her femineity and the conflict concerning the form of this manifestation is

initially a private affair, but widens so that it comprehends a larger perspective, including society and even the universe.

We can further state, that the nature of, neither the initial nor the final social manifestation of femineity in the saints' sagas, is invariable ; the variations they display are due to historical conditions.

The Old Norse literature only comprises the versions of the virgins' sagas which include the happy ending represented as a sort of marriage. Most of these sagas had a sufficient short and dramatic form to be told or read aloud at a divine service or at home ; such reproductions of the saint's saga were in themselves acts of the Christian cult ; the listeners have probably followed the apparent hero and the obvious villain, perfectly conscious as to, who in fact was the leading force controlling them both ; the powerful and victorious God of the Christians. By devoting attention to the temporal aspects of the sagas, as well as to the localities which establish the sceneries, and by examining the various forces that interact in the sagas, we can grasp one aspect of - and now I am again quoting Turville-Petre -"how biographies and wondertales could be written in books".

However, to secure the most adequate description of the saint's saga, it might be useful, not only to deal with the style of the saga - what Turville-Petre referred to as "how to say it" ; but to include an examination of how the saints' sagas taught the Icelanders "what to think and what to say".

My above remarks represent a suggestion for a procedure.

NOTES

- 1 The Lives of the Saints in Old Norse Prose. A Handlist. By O. Widding, H. Bekker-Nielsen and L.K.Shook. *Medieval Studies XXV*, 1963.
- 2 Heilagra manna sögur. Fortællinger og legender om hellige mænd og kvinder. Ed. C.R. Unger. Christiania 1877.
- 3 Early Icelandic Manuscripts in Facsimile. Vol. IV. Arnarnaganean Institute of Copenhagen. 1962.
- 4 Carlsson, Th. : *Norrön Legendforskning - en kort presentation*. *Scripta Islandica XXIII* 1972, pub. 1973.
- 5 Bekker-Nielsen, H., Damsgaard Olsen, Th., O. Widding : *Norrön Fortællekunst*. Copenhagen 1965.
- 6 Turville-Petre, G. : *Origins of Icelandic Literature*. Oxford 1953.
- 7 Gad, T. : *Legenden i dansk middelalder*. Diss. Copenhagen 1961.
- 8 Togeby, K. : *Verdens Litteratur Historie, vol. 2*. Copenhagen 1972.
- 9 Jonsson, F. : *Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie I-III*, Copenhagen 1920-24.
- 9a Turville-Petre, op. cit. p. 142.
- 10 Börtnes, J. : *Det russiske helgenvita*. Diss. Oslo 1975.
- 11 Boyer, R. : An attempt to define the typology of medieval hagiography. *Hagiography and Medieval Literature*. p. 27. A Symposium. Odense University Press 1981.
- 12 Philippart, G. : *Les légendiers Latins. Typologie des Sources du Moyen Age Occidental. Fasc. 24-25*, 1977.
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- 15 Carlé, B. : Thekla. En kvindeskikkelse i tidlig kristen fortällekunst. Copenhagen 1980.
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