

Gryf Anne Piebenga  
Department of Scandinavian Studies  
Faculty of Arts  
University of Groningen, The Netherlands

"HEYRDU HJALPIN SKERA", AN ICELANDIC MIRACLE POEM  
AND ITS ANTECEDENTS

Introduction

Miracles of the Virgin are tales of wonders attributed to Mary's intercession. About the origins of these tales nothing is known except that they arose in the eastern Mediterranean region. In the West the Libri miraculorum of Gregory of Tours, dating from the sixth century, are the earliest writings which contain miracles of the Virgin. As the role of Mary became more important in the centuries after this, more wonders were attributed to her intercession. In the eleventh and twelfth century, when the cult of the Virgin was at its height, there were countless miracles of the Virgin in circulation in southern and western Europe. Often the main characters in these tales of wonders in which Mary plays a ministering role, are either people with a modest background, or great sinners. When they have worshipped her by saying a Hail Mary daily, for example, then she remains loyal to them until death.

Until about 1100 the miracles of the Virgin were handed down mostly by word of mouth. After that time, clerics of different monastic orders began to collect the stories systematically. One of them was Caesarius of Heisterbach (c. 1180 to c. 1240) whose Dialogus Miraculorum became widely disseminated, as was the Legenda Aurea by Jacobus de Voragine (c. 1228 to 1298). The legends in these collections were subsequently copied by others or translated into one of the vernaculars. The copyists did not always stick to the originals, quite the opposite in fact: a free translation often resulted. This happened chiefly with the popular legends which were frequently reiterated. Some of these greatly loved miracles are for example the one about Theophilus, who sold his soul to the Devil for the restoration of his wordly dignity, and the one about the nun who fled from her convent and who on returning, became aware that Mary had taken her place.

In medieval Norwegian-Icelandic literature the miracles of the Virgin play a prominent part. A few hundred, excluding

alternative readings, have come down to us, - a considerable number in view of the small extent of the language area. They are edited by C.R. Unger in the Mariu saga (Christiania, 1871). Those written as original compositions can be counted on one hand: practically all of them are translations of Latin originals. To determine which of the many Latin versions the Norwegian-Icelandic legends best can be compared with is difficult, especially as the same theme may be found in several variants within the language area. Some of the legends date from before 1300. Most of them, however, go back to a collection translated for the Norwegian king Håkon Magnusson (1270-1319), and date from after 1300.

Besides the few hundred Miracles of Mary in prose, there are nineteen handed down in poetry. These miracle poems were published by Jón Helgason in Íslensk midaldakvæði (København, 1936-1938), and all are of Icelandic origin and as such belong exclusively to the national heritage of Iceland whereas the stories in prose are partly Norwegian and partly Icelandic. No names of writers are known, either of the prose versions or of the poems. Most of them have come to us in manuscripts dating from around 1500. Some of them were recorded in Icelandic later, in a few cases as late as the 17th or 18th centuries. The language does not give us much to base dating on, but it has been established that in general, the poems are later than the prose versions.

On the basis of the form, we can divide the Icelandic Miracles of the Virgin into two groups. In the first group are those that use the metre and verse-forms of Skaldic poetry; in the second group are those poems with end-rhyme. We cannot make a distinction on the basis of content because all the poems contain stories that are also known from Latin literature, and all except one are in Icelandic prose literature as well. Consequently we can compare the poems to these prose stories as published in the Mariu saga. Among the stories told in the poems are those of the Jewish boy who was protected from fire by the Virgin Mary, of the abbess who had a baby, of the woman with the candle, of the knight who sold his wife to the devil, and of the woman who, by seizing the Christ Child from a statue of the Virgin, compelled Mary to help her.

We shall now take a closer look at the last poem I mentioned - namely the poem about the woman who compelled Mary to help her. This poem takes its title from the opening words Heyrdu hjálpin skæra (Hear, immaculate Sister) and belongs to the group with end-rhyme. I have concentrated my research on two main issues in this context, namely: how does the poem relate to its antecedents, and, to what extent is it part of a European tradition. We could investigate all the Icelandic Miracle poems on these issues but we shall only concern ourselves with the poem Heyrdu hjálpin skæra here. Of course



CHILD-CHRIST SEIZED AS A PLEDGE

(illustration from engraving made by John Carter in 1784 and 1785 of paintings in St. Mary's Chapel of Winchester Cathedral, Hampshire. John Carter, Specimens of the Ancient Sculpture and Painting Now Remaining in This Kingdom, London, 1780-1794)

HEYRDU HJÁLPIN SKÆRA

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 18. Svanninn sveinnenn unga<br>sier ok þeckir hann<br>frelsaæt fliod af þunga<br>ok fram til kirkju rann<br>huggan upp i hiartad ste<br>Iesum berr med yndis grat<br>aptur i Mariu kne. | 12. Skapara skriptinn hæsta<br>skorinn med stein ok triam<br>berr hun barnit æzta<br>burtt ur modur kniam<br>vefur at einum silki sveip<br>i læstri kistu lykur hum þann<br>er lifs ur fadmi greip. |
|---|---|

(Íslensk midaldakvæði, ed. Jón Helgason, København 1936-38, p.  
166, 165)

conclusions, where reached, are valid only for this one poem. We can only come to conclusions for the genre as a whole after each poem is studied separately and in the same fashion.

"Heyrdu hjálpin skára" and its antecedents

The Miracle poem Heyrdu hjálpin skára tells of a rich widow with one son who live in Constantinople. One day the Saracens attack the city and take the widow's son prisoner. The woman is deeply distressed and goes to church every day where she stands in front of the statue of the Virgin asking for help. Twelve days pass and when her son has still not returned, she accuses Mary of having no pity on her. "Perhaps you think I do not grieve for the boy because he was conceived in sin," she asks. Having uttered these words she seizes the Christ Child from the knees of the statue, wraps it in a cloth and takes it home where she puts it in a box. The following night Mary appears to the boy in the dungeon where he is imprisoned. She causes his chains to break and orders him to go home as fast as he can. The mother is overjoyed to see her son again and hurries to the church where she replaces the figure of Christ and gives thanks to the Virgin.

This miracle, which in English is called Christ Child seized as a pledge, has been handed down in a great number of variants, the oldest ones written in Latin about 1220, the later ones both in Latin and in the vernaculars.<sup>1</sup> No two of the versions correspond completely with each other. The text which made the legend best known in Western-Europe is the one in the Legenda aurea (c. 131, §4) of Jacobus de Voragine. Where the motif of the taking away of the Christ-image comes from, is not known. It is logical to assume that this is a late motif. It could only have arisen in a time in which the faith in the Virgin had come to a culminating point, - to a point when it was possible to believe not only that the holy Virgin could help, but also that one could compel her to.

We know neither the writer of the Icelandic poem nor when it was written. The only possible assumption on grounds of language and content is that it does not go back further than the 15th century.<sup>2</sup> There are two versions: one in the manuscript AM 721 4° dating from the beginning of the 16th century and the other in JS 470 8° (nr. 124), an 18th century manuscript. The later version is rather different from the older one and for practical reasons we shall not discuss it here.

Before the legend of the woman who compelled Mary to help her was related in verse, a prose composition had already been written. It was published by C.R. Unger in his Mariu saga on page 314-317 after the text in the manuscript Holm,

11, 4°, which dates from the 14th century. The variant readings in two other manuscripts, one of which also dates from the 14th century, and the other from the 15th century, are mentioned by Unger at the bottom of the pages.<sup>3</sup> The three texts exhibit so few dissimilarities to each other that we may conclude that they all go back to the same original text.

The Icelandic prose text is more similar to the text from the Legenda aurea by Jacobus de Voragine than to any other handed down in Latin. On the basis of this we may assume that his text was used as model, and considering that the Legenda Aurea served as model for several Miracles of the Virgin in Icelandic, then this is not at all a bold assumption. In comparing the two texts we see that the Icelandic editor added several details,<sup>4</sup> the most important of which are: the widow is rich, she lives in Greece and has a chapel near her house containing a statue of the Virgin with a baby Jesus lying on her lap; the widow spends 15 days in prayer (in the Legenda aurea we only read that she prayed frequently); the widow herself offers the explanation for Mary's not helping her; the widow seizes the Christ Child from the statue in order to find out if her explanation was correct; when her son returns the widow asks forgiveness for her action (in the Legenda Aurea she only gives thanks to Mary).

A number of these additions also occur in the poem. That the widow is rich, for example, and that she lives in Greece, owns a chapel, and that she herself explains why the Virgin does not answer her prayers. There are more correspondences as the following quotations from the prose text (left) and the poem (right) show:

hvart pessi skilningr er rettr (315, 26)	hvort er skyrdir skipta skilning þenna mier (11)
sveipande einum silkiduk ok lesir nidr i kistu (316, 4-5)	vefur at einum silki sveip i laestri kistu lykur hun pann (12)
hann sitr i utlegd (316, 7-8)	hann situr i laundinn ut (13)
hann ... kemr a gard moþur sinnar (316, 18-19)	garpurinn kemur ... á gardinn sinnar mædur (17)

As well as similarities there are also differences. These concern not so much the story in itself but rather the way in which it is told. The prose writer describes the events with precision whereas the poet does so with vagueness. All seems to point to the fact that writers wrote their works with different purposes. For the prose writer it was important to reproduce the story in a logical and comprehensible way but for the poet this was less important. He was not interested in the course of events but rather in the emotions of the main characters. He fills nearly half the poem, which consists of 25 stanzas, with the description of their feelings:

in verse 2 the widow's devotion to the Virgin is described,  
in verses 7 to 11, the grief she feels on the loss of her son,  
in verse 13 (first part), the son's distress,  
in verse 13 (last part), 14 and 15, Mary's sorrow,  
and in verses 17 and 18, the joy of mother and son when they are reunited.

The events themselves are described concisely, so concisely in fact, that the connection between them is not always clear.

Another difference between the texts concerns the way in which Mary is described. The prose writer may have had more imagination in this respect than Jacobus de Voragine, but the poet still outdoes him. Besides the usual descriptions as vár frú, dróttning min, sæl María, which also appear in the prose text, he has designations like hjálpin skára, himnaríkis blóm, dróttins brúðr, mjúka ok skara módir guds, guddóms port, satast yndi, meylig mynd, dróttins módir, blessud brúðr, maris stella módir guds, listug lilja. The larger and more varied number of designations is not only the result of a richer tradition but also of a divergent perspective on the Virgin. Thus Mary is described in the poem as dróttins brúðr and blessud brúðr. This image of the Virgin as the Bride of God (sponsa Dei) does not occur in the prose text. In any case, descriptions of the Virgin as the Bride of God are very rare in 13th and 14th century Icelandic literature. It is only near the end of the Middle Ages that they start to occur, and they never became as widely accepted in Iceland as in the Southern European countries where, chiefly influenced by the Song of Solomon, a veritable mystic cult of the Bride arose.

Finally, we come to the different ways in which the main theme of the story, the removal of the Christ Child, is developed. According to the Legenda Aurea in which the event is briefly described, the widow says after having frequently prayed for help, "I shall seize your son and take him as a hostage for my son".<sup>5</sup> Later writers in other languages have, almost without exception, added something to this event. Some disapproved of the widow's action and said she only threatened to take the figure but did not actually do so. Others, like the Icelandic prose writer, tried to explain away her conduct. He has the widow say to Mary, "I think you blame me for loving my son. I shall see if I am right by taking away your only son from you." According to the poet of Heyrdu hjálpin skára the woman takes this action because she is angry. Freely translated, these are the words that in the poet's view, she said to the Virgin: "Perhaps you think that the loss of my son does not grieve me because he was conceived in sin? I do not care if sensible people agree with me or

not, I shall take away your son and you won't get him back until you return my son."

To our way of thinking these are statements that require some explanation. Why, for example, should the Virgin blame the widow for loving her son? For those who are acquainted with the Miracles of the Virgin, the answer lies in one of the quite familiar themes, namely that the Virgin required complete devotion and did not want those who worshipped her to be distracted by love for others. In these cases, however, it usually concerns men who have to choose between the Virgin and a worldly love. The theme that mothers should have to choose between Mary and their children does not occur anywhere else. Nor does the observation that children are conceived in sin. Once again we can say that this idea, as expressed by the widow to Mary, does not occur in the Latin texts of the legend Christ Child seized as a pledge nor, for that matter, in the Miracles of Mary in general.

#### Conclusions

There are, as the preceding observations show, quite a few differences between the Icelandic, late Medieval poem Heyrdu hjálpin skára, that tells of a widow who snatches the Christ Child from a statue of Mary to compel the Holy Virgin to help her, and the older Icelandic or Norwegian prose text, in which the same story is told. But there are so many similarities that we may conclude that the poem goes back to the prose text. This is not a spectacular conclusion, on the contrary, it is really rather obvious: the legend was known in Iceland - there are manuscripts to prove this - and perhaps the story was read aloud.

Did the poet made use of a Latin text beside the Icelandic prose text? This is a question that cannot be answered. There are no clues in his poem and that two Latin words occur (I Greciam, 17,6; maris stella 22,6) proves little. But even though he may never have seen the Latin text, we can establish the fact that the poem goes back to a Latin tradition by way of a prose text.

So both the prose text and the poem belong to a Latin, therefore to a non-Icelandic tradition. The poet was just as conscious of this as the prose writer. This is shown by the fact that he also has the story take place in a far country. Greece is mentioned in the prose text. The poet defines the place more precisely, as he says that the widow lives in Miklagard (= Constantinople). This is all the more conspicuous when we observe that no place names are mentioned in the Latin text. Both authors changed their stories to fit the surroundings: while the Legenda Aurea speaks of enemies who

attack the country, the prose writer says they are heathens and the poet calls them Saracens.

Although the poem belongs to a non-Icelandic tradition, the form is certainly an Icelandic one. In a sense it reminds one of Skaldic poetry in the first verses of which the praises are sung of the person this was written for, and in the last verses reward is requested. In our poem this must consist of Mary's help, especially on the Day of Judgment. And just as in the Skaldic poetry, the events here are related in a jerky almost staccato sort of way. Perhaps it is this combination of Icelandic styling and non-Icelandic content that gives the poem its greatest charm.

#### NOTES

- 1 For the Latin versions, see A. Poncelet, 'Index miraculorum B.V. Mariae quae saec. VI-XV latine conscripta sunt' in: Analecta Bollandiana, XXI, Bruxellis 1902, p. 241-361, nrs. 520, 611, 1295, 1296.
- 2 Compare Hans Schottmann, Die isländische Mariendichtung, München, 1973, p. 406.
- 3 For the dates of the manuscripts, see Ole Widding, Hans Bekker-Nielsen, L.K. Shook, 'The Lives of the Saints in Old Norse Prose. A Handlist' in: Mediaeval Studies XXV, 1963, p. 322-323.
- 4 It is uncertain if the writer had a copy of the Latin text. It is possible that he had heard the story. The opening words of his text, "Sva er lesit" (Mariu saga, p. 314), can mean: "Thus has been read" or "Thus has been read aloud".
- 5 Th. Graesse (ed.): Jacobi a Voragine, Legenda aurea, 1890, p. 591.