

Macbeth and Sverrir

1.

In Shakespeare's "Macbeth" and "Sverris Saga" there are two passages which lend themselves readily for comparison. The Shakespearean passage in question is Banquo's comment on the first of the Witches' prophesies coming true. On learning the news of Macbeth's having become the Thane of Cawdor Banquo exclaims, "What, can the devil speak true?" (I, iii, 107) and then, after being told how this new "addition" has passed to its new owner, Banquo says to Macbeth on the spur of the moment:

That, trusted home,
Might yet enkindle you unto the crown,
Besides the Thane of Cawdor. But 'tis strange:
And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's
In deepest consequence (I, iii, 120-26)

A parallel can be drawn between this warning of Banquo to Macbeth and Ásbjörn Jónsson's speech (Tala Ásbjarnar Jónssonar) in *Sverris saga* (ch. 90). On the eve of the eve of the battle which is to be decisive in the fight for power in Norway Ásbjörn Jónsson, who is on the side of Sverrir's enemies, is facing the future with confidence trusting that Sverrir will be defeated and "er lokið slæðum hans ok brögðum; þvíat nú mun sá bregðast honum ok þeim Birkbeinum, er hefir hann öll ráð af tekit, en þat er sá fjandinn er hann trúir á, ok er hann svá vanr við sína vini, at veita þeim framgáng um hríð, en bregðast þeim á endadögum lífs þeirra".¹ Not only thematically, but in the very layout of their subject-matter are the two passages similar. We find the same school of thought in both: the devil lures man only to lead him to an exonerable disaster.

¹ *Saga Sverrir Konungs. Fornmanna Sögur, Bd. 8, Kaupmannahöfn, 1834, pp. 220-221.*

The conceptual analogy is thus revealed pointing to the context of the Christian austerity. Although warnings against perils of this world, among which the "diabolical industry" is given a prominent place, can be traced to the patristic writings, as Williard Farnham has shown, from the twelfth century on the attitudes of the Christian austerity received a new impetus and got deeply involved in the process of shaping a Renaissance sense of values.² It is against this background that the coalescence of historicity and fiction centred round the figures of Macbeth and Sverrir can be brought out in sharp relief.

2

Had Ásbjörn Jónsson's hopes been fulfilled and the desired victory of Magnús Erlingsson over the Birkebeins come about Sverrir's record left to posterity might solely have been conceived much in the same light as that of Macbeth was.

On the one hand, as Henry Paul points out, "the earliest Scottish chronicles are little more than lists of the regnal years of kings"³ and in the scanty information about the historical figure of Macbeth given by these documents there are no pejorative comments on this king of Scotland (ruled in 1040-1057). Duncan, we can read, for example, in one source, was slain in the autumn (on the nineteenth before the Kalends of September) by his general Macbeth mac Finlay, who succeeded him to the kingdom for seventeen years"⁴ The end of Macbeth's reign is also described by another eleventh century chronicler without any expression of personal opinion: "At this time earl Siward (of Norhtumbria) went with a great army into Scotland, with a fleet and a land-force, and fought against the Scots, and put to flight the king Macbeth and slew all that were best there in the land, and brought thence much war-spoil, such as no man obtained before".⁵

On the other hand, the earliest detailed story of Macbeth appeared only at the end of the fourteenth century ("*Cronica Gentis Sgotorum*" by

² Farnham, W. *The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy*, 1963.

³ Paul, H.N. *The Royal Play of Macbeth. When, Why and How it was written*, NY, 1950, p. 206.

⁴ Anderson, A.O. *Scottish Annals from English Chroniclers, A.D. 500 till 1236*. London (David Nutt), 1908, p. 84. Cf. *Early Sources of Scottish History*, vol. I London (Oliver and Boyd), 1922, p. 579 ff.

⁵ *Scottish Annals*, p. 85.

John of Fordoun, ca. 1385)⁶ and long before the association of the figure of Macbeth with, to use Henry Paul's words, "the romance which has developed into the play which William Shakespeare wrote"⁷ Sverrir was regarded as a fallen prince just in the manner which was to become the Renaissance literary fashion after the publication of Boccaccio's "De Casibus Virorum Illustrium".⁸

Sverrir was blamed for having usurped the regal power in Norway. He was called "monstrum illud quod hiis solis parcit quibus nocere non potest (the monster keeping from harming solely those whom he cannot harm)"⁹ and "membrum illud diaboli (the limb of the devil)".¹⁰ This was the way Sverrir was characterized by Pope Innocent III who deplore "tirannica Sueri crudelitas et violentia detestanda (Sverrir's cruelty and detestable violence)"¹¹ The Pope headed the pro-pagandistic campaign joining his voice to those of the churchmen who condemned "ille qui de regio nomine et usurpata regni plenitudine gloriatur (that one who brags of the regal title and the plenitude of the usurped regal power)"¹² : Innocent III "laid the inerdict upon Norway. He wrote warning to the Icelandic Bishops of Skálholt and Holt to use every weapon against the king's party; he bade Archbishop Eric from his refuge with Archbishop Absolon in Denmark excommunicate the Bishop of Bergen for favouring Sverre and ordered the whole body of prelates from any dealings with the man. he begged the King of Denmark and Sweden to gird themselves and overthrow 'that limb of the devil' ".¹³

The fight of Innocent III against Sverrir has been dealt with in various contexts of both Norwegian and European history as well as the history of the papacy.¹⁴ We are concerned here only with the literary aspect of the Pope's rejection of the Norwegian king - its harsh rhetoric. The point to be underlined is that the Pope sees Sverrir as a devilish man,

⁶ Bullough, g. Narrative and Dramatic sources of Shakespeare, vol. VII (Major Tragedies), L. & NY, 1973, p. 435.

⁷ Paul H.N., op. cit., p. 207

⁸ Farnham, W., op. cit., p. 71.

⁹ Diplomatarium Norvegicum, VI, Christiania, 1864, p. 12.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 10.

¹² Ibid., p. 4.

¹³ The Cambridge Medieval History, ed. by J. R. Tanner, CW Prevete-Orton, L.N. Brooke, vol., VI. Victory of the Papacy, Cambridge, p. 29.

¹⁴ For the general information see: Lunden K. Norge under Sverreætten, 1177-1319. In: Norges historie, red. K. Mykland, Oslo: Capelens, Bd. 3, 1976. I would like to express my gratitude to Mrs. Gro Veslemøy Eikenes for help in working with books in the Norwegian language. The responsibility for the interpretation of facts lies naturally with me.

he represents the king as an impostor maintaining his power by cruelty and tyranny, he condemns the state of affairs in his kingdom.

Henry N. Paul believes that the initial information about Macbeth which can be found in the eleventh century chronicles was expanded into the "romance" by John of Fordoun and other later chroniclers. "This mere framework of known historic facts, the scholar writes, tempted the industrious chroniclers of later centuries to make their work more readable by filling the factual gaps with picturesque but traditional or imaginary stories detailing what they thought might have happened during Macbeth's reign, and of is this fictious history, built into the framework of fact, which we see on the stage when the play of Macbeth is performed".¹⁵

Since the publication of H.N. Paul's book on Shakespere's "Macbeth" Milman Parry, Albert Lord and Mikhail Steblin-Kamensky have taught us something new about the relations between author and audience as well as the working of the literary tradition so that not all of Paul's ideas may look up-to-date. But even so, the problem of the guiding-lines, or the "themes", as A. Lord would have it, according to which the "fictious history" of Macbeth's reign could have been devised remains topical. Innocent's view of Sverrir may have been suggestive in this respect.

HALLGERÐR HOSKULDSÐÓTTIR: HER DOMESTIC ECONOMY
AND THE REALIZATION OF HER MIXED MORAL NATURE

Post-war critics generally savaged Hallgerðr Höskuldsdóttir, understandably to be sure: an academic age characterized by patriarchy, piety, and patristics could hardly choose but condemn as "evil" a woman who married three times, encouraged the killing of her first husband, and refused to help the virtuous third when his need was greatest. I. R. Maxwell describes Hallgerðr as "the known cause of evil" in Njála and asserts that "The evil of Hallgerðr (with Þráinn as its transmitter) and the evil of Valgerðr and Mörðr both go back to the prologue . . ." In the same moralizing vein, Lars Lönnroth claims that the saga represents Hallgerðr as "an evil femme fatale" and that "Hallgerðr turns out to be one of the main forces of evil in the saga." Her modern detractors often cite the saga's last two harsh commentators on Hallgerðr, Rannveig and Skarpheðinn. Those saga characters whose "balanced" observations on Hallgerðr give her story a philosophical context unlike that regarded as "mediaeval" by post-war modernism are usually not cited. We shall hear from them shortly.

The narrator of Njála makes no explicitly judgmental observations on Hallgerðr; an early critic, Hans Kinck, defends her as one whom the saga itself misunderstood. Einarr Ólafur Sveinsson enters a plea of insanity in Hallgerðr's defence