

**The Genesis of Fiction in the North  
(Plenary Paper)**

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In September 2005 E. L. Doctorow published *The March*, which was awarded the PEN/Faulkner prize for fiction. The work, which is subtitled *A Novel*, relates General Sherman's Civil War campaign. Asked in an interview what the difference is between a historian writing history and a novelist, he replied: 'The historian will tell you what happened. The novelist will tell you what it felt like' ('Ten Questions,' 2006, 6). His reply relates to the topic of my paper, that is, the genesis of fiction in the North. While the novel is fiction, not all works of fiction are novels, yet they have one element in common, that is, they are invented by the imagination. Fiction and the imagination that produces it provide answers to questions generated by history but left unanswered in historiography.

On the continent vernacular fiction sprang up out of nowhere, it would seem, in the twelfth century, and some scholars have plausibly argued—most recently D. H. Green—that fiction arose when authors attempted to fill in the lacunae left by historiographers, thereby emancipating romance from history (Green, 2002, 177). Chrétien de Troyes is generally acknowledged as the creator of French fiction when he invented the genre known as Arthurian romance. Unlike heroic epic, which purported to be true, Arthurian romance presented itself 'as an autonomous literary invention' whose authority resided 'in the creative virtuosity of the writer' (Spiegel, 1993, 63). This earliest French fiction appears to have followed on the heels of historiography as a means of accounting for lacunae in the historical record concerning King Arthur. While the early twelfth-century historian Geoffrey of Monmouth provided ample information about Arthur's conquests of foreign countries in his *Historia regum Britanniae*, he remained silent on the subject of the king's peacetime pursuits. This was left to Chrétien de Troyes who placed the action of his first romance, *Erec et Enide*, in the historiographically empty period of Arthurian peace and shifted the focus from the king to his knights of the Round Table (Green, 2002, 177–78).

The fictionalization of the Arthurian matter had already begun, however, in the vernacular versions of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*, when his successors started tampering, for example, with the story of Uther's seduction of Ygernia, who gives birth to King Arthur. As Geoffrey tells it, Uther falls passionately in love with the wife of Duke Gorlois of Cornwall when he meets her at a banquet. Aware of Uther's flirtation with his wife, Gorlois abruptly leaves the court and secludes Ygernia in the castle of Tintagel. Uther retaliates by declaring war on the duke. At the same time he is so smitten with Ygernia that he engages Merlin to help him gain access to her. With Merlin's help, Uther takes on the appearance of Gorlois, goes to Tintagel, and spends the night with Ygernia, who believes him to be her husband. Arthur is conceived. Gorlois is subsequently killed, and Geoffrey matter-of-factly relates:

Cumque omnem eventum didicisset, ob caedem Gorlois doluit, sed ob Ingernam a maritali toro solutam gavisus est. Reversus itaque ad oppidum Tintagel, cepit Ingernam et voto suo potitus est. Commanserunt deinde

pariter non minimo amore ligati progenueruntque filium et filiam. Fuit autem nomen filii Arthurus, nomen vero filiae Anna. (*Historia regum Britanniae*, 1951, 149: 507–11)

The Middle English *Brut* concludes just as unproblematically—Layamon merely notes: ‘There and then Uther the king took Ygerne as queen; Ygerne was with child by King Uther before she was married, all through the magic of Merlin’ (*Layamon’s Arthur*, 1989, 21)—as does his French source by Wace, who states that after Gorlois’s death, Uther returned to Tintagel and:

Li rois ot molt Yguerne amee;  
Sanz essoine l’a esposee.  
La nuit ot un fil conceil  
Et au terme a un file eü.

Artus ot non’ (*La Partie Arthurienne*, 1962, vv. 273–78).

The very matter-of-fact resolution of the Uther/Ygerne tale by Geoffrey and in the French and English *Brut* leaves a narrative gap in respect to the interaction of Uther and Ygerne that begs for completion. This gap is filled in *Breta sögur*, where the author has Uther confess to Ygerne how he had deceived her. He promises to compensate her by making her his queen and marrying her. Her response is an extended lament:

Nú er ek sárliga suikin oc hǫrmuliga gint; hó, hó! segir hon, mikil óskaup ero vorðin, sua er sem ek sè vorðin banamaðr bónda míns. sua ágætz, honum unna ek (sem) líkama síalfrar minnar oc sua sem lífi mínu, hann villdi mèr allt gott oc þat skal verða allðri at ek gáangi lostig í sama sæng þeim manni, er minn bónda hefir suikit, oc fyrr skal ek láta mitt líf en þat verði. Hon grætr nú sárliga oc berr sua mikinn harm, at engi maðr mátti hugga hana. (*Breta sögur*, 1849, p. 86, n. 1)

Uther has to have recourse to Merlin once more. The sorcerer gives Ygerne a magic potion ‘at hon muni engar heiptir við þig, en verði þer vel unnandi’ (*Breta sögur*, 1849, p. 87, n. 1). The potion works its magic and the narrator remarks that Uther and Ygerne came to love each other greatly: ‘oc takaz með þeim miklar aster.’

Both Geoffrey and Wace wrote as chroniclers in relating the Uther-Ygerne story; they were solely interested in establishing how King Arthur came to be conceived. The author of the text in *Breta sögur*, however, was compelled to explore the dynamics of interaction between Uther and Ygerne, to make ‘creative use of a narrative vacancy’ (Green, 2002, 193), and thereby historiography became fiction. To rephrase Doctorow: Geoffrey told us what happened, but the author of the above told us what it felt like. Ygerne’s lament in response to having learned the truth from Uther is comparable to that of the eponymous protagonist of *Ívens saga*, an Arthurian romance, when he learns that he has been rejected by his wife:

Til hvers skal ek lífa? Vesall maðr var ek, svá ógeyminn. Hvat skal ek útan drepa mik sjálf? Ek hefi týnt huggan minni ok fagnaði, ok um snúit af sjálfs míns glæp virðing minni, ok vent tign minni í týning, yndi mitt í angrsemi, líf mitt í leiðindi, hjarta mitt í hugsótt, unnustu mína í óvin, frelsi mitt í friðleysi; eða hví dvel ek at drepa mik? (*Ívens saga*, 1999, 74)

There is no way of knowing whether Ygerne’s reaction in *Breta sögur* to the news that she had slept with Uther, and not her husband, is to be attributed to the Norse

translator of Geoffrey's *Historia* or whether the expansion had already taken place in the Latin redaction that was the source of *Breta sögur*. It does not really matter who authored the above. What does matter is the fact that the author of Ygerna's monologue was writing not as a chronicler but rather as a romancier, like Chrétien de Troyes. He was interested not solely in establishing the facts of Arthur's conception; his interest also lay in characterization, motivation, and emotional response. He expanded the transmitted 'historical' material so as to develop his own narrative meaning, and thus he stepped over the threshold of historiography and entered the realm of fiction.

The passage I have quoted is found in the manuscript AM 573 4to, which is dated 1330–70. This redaction has unfortunately not yet been published. The text of *Breta sögur* that we all know is that of *Hauksbók*, produced by Haukr Erlendsson between 1301 and 1314, which is a reduced version compared to that in AM 573 (Würth, 1998, 40). In *Hauksbók* the corresponding passage is quite different; in fact, Haukr takes us back to Geoffrey's and Wace's laconic chronicles, when he writes:

Hann gengr síþan til kastalans ok segir Igerne allt eð sanna. Hon samþyckir þa við konvng ock feck hann þa hennar. þav attv .ij. born. Het svn þeira Artvrvs en dottir Anna. (*Breta sögur*, 1849, 286–87)

As Stefanie Würth noted, Haukr was not interested in the depiction of emotion nor in motifs characteristic of courtly literature, such as feasts (1988, 167). His redaction was intended less as an entertaining narrative than a historiographical work (Würth, 1988, 74). If one compares the Uther-Ygerna episode in AM 573 with that in *Hauksbók*, however, we are confronted by two very different types of narrative, romance, if you will, in the former and chronicle in the latter. In AM 573 the lacunae left by historiography have been filled with the stuff of fantasy, that is, fiction.

We do not know whether the extensive narrativization in AM 573 of *Breta sögur* is the work of the redactor of the Latin manuscript that was the source of the translation or whether this is to be ascribed to an Icelandic redactor. I suspect that what we read in the AM 573 redaction of *Breta sögur* corresponds to the original translation which, I believe, transmitted more or less faithfully the text of the Latin source, in which Geoffrey's Arthurian legend had already been fictionalized and augmented. The depiction of Arthur's coronation festivities at Whitsun supports my thesis.

*Hauksbók* reduced to one long sentence the account of Arthur's coronation. In Geoffrey's *Historia* the depiction of the festivities extends to four pages in print (*Historia regum Britanniae*, 1951, 161–65). Geoffrey lists the notables who attend, describes the church service, the elegant feasting, and the games and jousts of the knights that the ladies watch from the top of the city walls. Haukr summarizes the very long account of the festivities with a single sentence:

Hann bauð til sín at hvítasunnu öllum konúngum, hertogum ok jorlum, ok öllum höfðingjum í sínu ríki, ok var hann þá krúnaðr ok svâ drottning, ok er sú veizla víðfrægjust orðin á norðrlöndum bæði at fornu ok nýju. (*Breta sögur*, 1849, 98)

The AM 573 redaction diverges, however, by transmitting not only much of Geoffrey's text but also other matter. Of particular interest is an addition to the depiction of the entertainment at dinner just before the knights proceed outdoors to engage in jousting. We are told:

þá er dryckiu var lokit oc hennar varð i milli, þá voru leikar oc taufl oc saugur, þar var allzkyns strengleikar: fiöflur oc gígjur, bumbur oc pípur oc simpfóníam oc haurpur. (*Breta sögur*, 1849, fu. 11, 100–1)

The description of music at court festivities is an element familiar to anyone who has ever read a romance, and we also find such in the indigenous Icelandic *riddarasögur*. And so the question arises whether it was the Norse translator of the *Historia regum Britanniae* who added this material. Most likely not. Whereas the description of the music accompanying the festivities at Arthur's court is not found in the *Historia*—at least not in the manuscripts that have been edited—it can be found in Wace's *Roman de Brut*, which reports:

Molt ot a la cort juleors,  
 Chanteors, estrumanteors;  
 Molt poissiez oïr chançons,  
 Rotruanges et noviaus sons,  
 Viecleüres, lais et notes,  
 Lais de vieles, lais de notes,  
 Lais de harpes et de fretiaus,  
 Lires, tympres et chalemiaus,  
 Symphonies, psalterions,  
 Monacordes, cymbes, chorons.  
 Asez i ot tresgiteors,  
 Joeresses et joeoors;  
 Li un dient contes et fables,  
 Auquant demandent dez et tables.  
 Teus i a joent a hasart,  
 Ce est uns geus de male part;  
 As eschas joent li plusor,  
 Au geu del mat ou au mellor.

(*Arthur dans le Roman de Brut*, 1962, 1997–2014).

The passage shows that neither the account of story telling nor that of the music enjoyed at Arthur's court is original in *Breta sögur*.

It would seem that *Breta sögur* in AM 573 transmits the text of the original translation, which Haukr, however, had deleted or reduced, and the source of this translation was a redaction of Geoffrey's *Historia* that deviated substantially from what has come down to us. Indeed, Wace's *Brut* is based on two versions of Geoffrey's *Historia*, the Vulgate version, that is, Geoffrey's version, and an anonymous Variant version. In his account of the reign of Arthur, Wace 'weaves into his narrative elements of a more openly fictional nature, including oral tales' (*The Arthur of the English*, 1999, 19). Even more than Wace, whose narrative has been called that of a storyteller and a visual artist (*Arthur dans le Roman de Brut*, 1962, 34–35), the anonymous author of the source of the AM 573 redaction of *Breta sögur* produced a narrative that edged the more or less laconic historiographic record of the Arthurian legend into the realm of romance. The *form old* of historiography became the *form old* of romance.

Whereas the fictionalization of the Uther/Ygerna tale was presumably undertaken by the redactor of the Latin source of *Breta sögur*, the lacunae in Northern

historiography also inspired Norse authors/redactors to generate fiction as a means of filling the gaps of history. An outstanding example is *Hrólfs saga kraka*, in which a more drastic narrativization and consequently fictionalization occurred than that in the *matière de Bretagne* of *Breta sögur*. Indeed, the eponymous protagonist of *Hrólfs saga kraka* bears a not inconsiderable similarity to King Arthur. Like the legendary British king, the legendary Danish king's birth is the result of deception, not as the result of magic, as is the case with Arthur, but rather vengeance. In either case, however, appearance is mistaken for reality. Exemplary for the transformation of historiography into romance is the so-called *Helga þáttur*, the tale accounting for the birth of Hrolf kraki.

In *Skjöldunga saga*, thought to have been composed between 1180 and 1200, but transmitted solely in Arngrímur Jónsson's Latin version of 1596, we learn that on a Viking expedition Helgi Hálfðanarson arrives in Saxland while its ruler is out of the country. Queen Álof welcomes him because she knows it is futile to offer resistance. Similarly, when Helgi suggests that they sleep together, she does not refuse. Knowing that she does not have the forces to prevent this, she resorts to cunning instead. Helgi's excessive consumption of alcohol causes him to fall asleep in a drunken stupor, and Álof has him shaved, tarred, and feathered, and taken back to his ships. The entire account is rather matter-of-fact, as is the report of Helgi's vengeance a year later. He returns to take her by force and for three nights he sleeps with her in the woods. We learn that Yrsa is born out of this sexual congress and that she later became queen of Sweden. In the same noncommittal voice the narrator now reports that Helgi resumes his Viking forays, attacks Sweden, and abducts Yrsa, whom he marries. Their son was Hrolf kraki. Not until three years later does Álof inform her daughter that Helgi is her father (*Skjöldunga saga*, 23–25).

The account of how Yrsa came to be conceived and subsequently marry her own father and give birth to Hrolf is related in the third person. The only motivation provided is to explain why Álof did not resist Helgi and why Helgi married Yrsa—he did not know he was her father (25). In the earliest account of the legend of Hrolf kraki, in the *Gesta Danorum*, Saxo of course has his own opinion of Helgi—not to mention Yrsa's mother. He characterizes Helgi as a man of savage disposition, whose ferocity was matched by his lechery—'luxuria tamen sævitiam æquabat' (*Saxonis Gesta Danorum*, 1931, II: 2). And as an example, Saxo relates that 'on the island of Thorø he raped a virgin, Thora, who afterwards gave birth to a daughter she named Yrsa' (*The History of the Danes*, 1979, 51). Nonetheless, despite his very negative portrayal of Helgi, Saxo notes that Helgi had the benefit of ignorance (*Saxonis Gesta Danorum*, 1931, II: 4). Aside from this one reference to Helgi's motivation, however, Saxo supplies only the facts of the incident that ultimately leads to the incestuous union from which Hrolf kraki was to issue.

Snorri Sturluson is both more and less forthcoming than Saxo. He starts *in medias res* with the abduction by Aðils of Yrsa from Saxland. Geirþjófr, the ruler, was out of the country and his wife was Álof the Powerful. Snorri comments: 'Ekki er getit barna þeira' (Snorri Sturluson, 1941, 56). Aðils marries Yrsa and she became queen of Sweden. King Helgi, the son of Hálfðan, subsequently harried in Sweden, and he abducted Yrsa and in turn married her. Their son was Hrolf kraki. When Hrolf was three years old, Queen Álof came to Denmark and told Yrsa that King Helgi, her

husband, was her father and she herself, her mother (Snorri Sturluson, 1941, 56–57). Snorri does not reveal how this came about.

In these three accounts of the origin of Hrolf kraki, the authors were chroniclers of events, not interpreters, though Saxo could not resist interweaving a running commentary and judgment on the behavior of men and women alike. The historiographers reported ascertainable facts; they were little concerned with motivation nor did they depict characters interacting in conversation or expressing their feelings. In the prologue to *Heimskringla* Snorri notes that among his sources were some ancient poems. He remarks:

En þótt vér vitim eigi sannendi á því, þá vitum vér dæmi til, at gamlir fræðimenn hafi slíkt fyrir satt haft (1941, 4).

In other words, the accounts in such sources were considered fact by his learned predecessors, and that is what Snorri wanted to transmit. Although Geoffrey of Monmouth's and Saxo's prehistorical figures are of quite a different order than the Norwegian kings portrayed in *Heimskringla*, Snorri's comment in *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar* that he has not given more information about the king because he does not want to record unsubstantiated stories is worth consideration: '

. . . vér viljum eigi setja á bækur vitnislausar sögur. Þótt vér hafim heyrð ræður eða getit fleiri hluta, þá þykkir oss heðan í frá betra, at við sé aukit, en þetta sama þurfi ör at taka (Snorri Sturluson, 1979, 118–19).

They may not have expressed this in so many words, but in their recounting of British and Danish forehistory, Geoffrey and Saxo by and large adhere to Snorri's dictum.

Snorri's approach to history, as well as Saxo's and that of the author of *Skjöldunga saga*, is unlike that of the author of *Hrólfs saga kraka*. The chroniclers of the legendary King Hrolf, like the chroniclers of the legendary King Arthur, were primarily interested in transmitting ascertainable facts, and especially Snorri did not want to transmit anything that his sources did not consider to be fact. The author of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, however, interpreted those facts. His interest lay in story and meaning; he filled the narrative lacunae with incidents that could have occurred, that were possible and plausible, even though historiographers did not record them. As was the case for King Arthur, the *res factae* of Hrolf kraki's origins needed to be augmented with *res fictae* to satisfy a different audience—or in any case the aesthetic and generic demands of a different type of narrative. The details of the union of Helgi and Ólof were not part of the historiographical record and the author of the saga made creative use of this lacuna. Nonetheless, some of the fantastic details in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, while appearing to be a product of the anonymous author's imagination, did already exist in literary reality.

To explain how it came about that Helgi married his own daughter and had a child by her, the author of the saga drew on a popular Icelandic story pattern, though its origins lay outside Iceland, namely the *meykongr* or maiden-king narrative. Presumably the oldest representative of the type is *Klári saga*, which, according to the manuscripts, became known to Jón Halldórsson, bishop of Skálholt (1322–29), during his course of study in Paris. The saga informs us that the source was a Latin metrical romance which Jón had found in France ('Clari saga', *Riddarasögur*, V, 1954, 3). No such text has survived. *Klári saga* and its Icelandic derivatives belong to a subgenre of romance unique to Iceland. The type is distinct from other bridal-quest narratives

inasmuch as the desired bride herself, the ruler of a country or region, refuses all suitors because she considers them inferior and hence undeserving of marriage to her. She mistreats all wooers and sends them packing after having thoroughly disgraced and humiliated them. Eventually the suitor manages to outwit and avenge himself on the woman, most often by detecting a moral flaw in her, usually avarice. Once the maiden king has found her match in trickery and cunning, she gives in—and they live happily ever after.

This pattern obtains for all the maiden-king narratives, but *Klári saga* and the *Helga þáttur* offer variants of the pattern. Neither tale concludes with a wedding; the aftermath in each is vengeance, and in the case of the *Helga þáttur* the outcome is tragic. *Klári saga* most likely was conceived as an exemplum concerning appropriate wifely virtues, and the romance does not conclude, as do the other Icelandic representatives of the maiden-king type, with the couple's marriage, but rather continues with a narrative in which the wife is made to undergo the worst imaginable trials and tribulations to determine whether she is indeed a proper wife. In fact, the saga's conclusion, its explicit moral, is indebted to St. Paul's exhortation in Ephesians (5:22) and Colossians (3:18) that wives should be subject to their husbands as to the Lord.

The author of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, like Chrétien de Troyes, was dissatisfied with the lacunae in the historiographical record of his subject. He built on the known 'facts' of Hrolf's life by fleshing out the story of how he came to be conceived by introducing explanatory details and motivation. The maiden-king paradigm provided the perfect framework for developing what was essentially a tragic tale. How was this achieved?<sup>1</sup>

Unlike what Snorri and *Skjöldunga saga* tell us, Ólof, the queen of Saxland is not married and behaves and dresses like a warrior king. At the same time she is also the most desirable match in the North, yet she does not want to marry. Helgi takes this as a challenge, arrives in her country with his army, and proposes marriage to her. The night's drinking has its effects on him and Ólof ensures that he does not wake up by sticking him with a sleeping thorn. As happens in *Skjöldunga saga*, Helgi is shaved and tarred. By the time Helgi returns to exact vengeance on the queen, her arrogance and pride, thus the narrator, have never been greater, and she is furthermore described as being most avaricious. Helgi, disguised as a beggar, claims to have found a great treasure, and in the hope of acquiring it, the queen goes into the woods. When she realizes who he is, she apologizes for her previous behavior and asks him to make plans for their wedding. The rest is history. The Helgi/Ólof tale, like the Uther/Ygerna tale, exemplifies the transformation of historiography into fiction. The crucial details of the relatively long *Helga þáttur* already existed in historiography. What did not exist

<sup>1</sup> Some thirty years ago Lars Lönnroth suggested the possibility that *Karlamagnús saga* exerted a structural influence on *Hrólfs saga kraka* ('Charlemagne, Hrolf Kraki, Olaf Tryggvason: Parallels in the Heroic tradition,' *Les relations littéraires franco-scandinaves au Moyen Âge. Actes du Colloque de Liège* (avril 1972) [Paris: Société d'Édition 'Les Belles Lettres,' 1975], p. 34). A certain structural similarity between the two works cannot be denied, yet such structures are common in medieval literature, for example, in the great Arthurian compilations. I propose that Hrolf kraki's legend and that of King Arthur are similar in their development from historiography.

was a literary narrative. The author of *Hrólfs saga* transformed the rather dry facts of a rape and incest by introducing characterization, motivation, and dialogue. By interpreting the traditional facts of Hrolf's origin through the introduction of motivation and causation he produced a fantastic narrative; he invented fiction. This was not entirely the product of his imagination, however, for it was based on an already existing narrative paradigm, that of the maiden king. The author's imagination came into play when he recognized the suitability and adaptability of the maiden-king pattern for filling in the narrative gaps in the traditional Helgi/Olqf story.

But the author of *Hrólfs saga kraka* took a further step vis-à-vis his historiographical sources in relating the *matière de Hrolf kraki*: like Chrétien de Troyes, the originator of romance in France, the anonymous saga author provided not only the *conjointure*, that is, the organization of the traditional story, for his audience, but also the *san*, its meaning. Just prior to the tragic ending of Hrolf's life, the author/narrator reminds the audience of the alterity of that distant past:

En ekki er þess getit, at Hrólfur konungur né kappar hans hafi nokkurn tíma blótat goð, heldr trúðu þeir á mátt sinn ok megin, því þá var ekki boðuð sú helga trú hér á Norðurlöndum, ok því höfðu þeir lítit skyn á skapara sínum, sem bjuggu í norðurláfunni. (*Hrólfs saga kraka*, 1960, 112)<sup>2</sup>

The author concludes *Hrólfs saga kraka* by suggesting how Hrolf's life was to be understood by us. He moved Hrolf's life into the orbit of other historical figures who had perished because of their shortcomings, most notably Alexander, by referring to Gautier de Châtillon, the author of the *Alexandreis*:

'Ok fór þetta eptir líkendum,' sagði meistarinn Galterus, 'at mannligr máttur kunni ekki at standast við þvílíkum fjanda krapti, utan máttur guðs hefði á móti komit, ok stóð þér þat eitt fyrir sigrinum, Hrólfur konungur,' sagði meistarinn, 'at þú hafðir ekki skyn á skapara þínum.' (*Hrólfs saga kraka*, 1960, 123).<sup>3</sup>

Through this indirect reference to Alexander, Hrolf is admitted to the herocracy of pagan times; Hrolf's life and death are to be seen as a struggle between paganism and Christianity, between Skuld's magic and the power of the one true God. Had Hrolf only had knowledge of Christ, he would not have perished in his battle against pagan sorcery.

The author of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, it would seem, had at his disposal the aggregate of oral and written lore concerning the legendary king. His achievement was to take the assumed non-fictional world created by historiographers and generate from it the imaginary world of fiction.

In both the *Breta sögur* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* the lacunae of historiography are filled with narrative elements associated with medieval romance. We encounter a similar fictionalization of history in a somewhat different type of work, which is,

<sup>2</sup> I have normalized the orthography in Slay's edition.

<sup>3</sup> The reference is to a rather long passage at the end of *Alexanders saga*, which commences as follows: 'Eptir dauða konungs melir sva meistare Galterus í sinne boc. Sællt vere mannkynet ef þat hefðe iafnan firir augum ser himnesca lute. oc ottaðez sina dauðastund, er optiliga kemr þa er minnzt varir' (C. R. Unger, ed., *Alexanders saga*. Norsk Bearbeidelse fra trettende Aarhundrede af Philip Gautiers latinske Digt Alexandreis [Christiania, 1848], p. 163).



however, like *Hrólfs saga kraka*, the story of the life and death of a king. I am referring to *Ósvalds saga*, the legend of St. Oswald of Northumbria, who died a martyr in a battle against pagan forces in AD 642. *Ósvalds saga* is one of twenty-five legends in *Reykjahólabók*, the Book of Reykjahólar, which was compiled in the 1530's, shortly before the Reformation took hold in Iceland (*Reykjahólabók*, I, 1969, 71–95). Twenty-two legends in this compilation derive from Low German, among them *Ósvalds saga*, which is a translation of a long, narratively sophisticated German legend that circulated in the German-language area before 1400 but which has not been preserved.<sup>4</sup> The German 'Oswald' was quadripartite and consisted of a coronation legend, a bridal-quest and conversion legend, Oswald's *passio* and death, and a collection of miracles. The last two parts, the *passio* and the miracles relate aspects of Oswald's life that are found in scattered form in Books 2 and 3 of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*. These were subsequently compiled in the eleventh century into a continuous Latin narrative by Drogo (†1084), a monk in the Benedictine abbey of Bergues-St-Winnoc in French Flanders.<sup>5</sup> The coronation and bridal-quest legends exist, however, only in the vernacular legend that was composed in the German-language area and which is extant today solely in Icelandic translation.

What does *Ósvalds saga* have to do with the fictionalization of historiography, in this case, sacred historiography, that is, hagiography? Like the legend of Hrolf kraki that is transmitted in historiography, Bede's and Drogo's legend of St. Oswald mentions but does not elaborate on certain events in the life of the protagonist, and like the author of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, the author of *Ósvalds saga* filled the lacunae with plausible narrative. The single sentence in the *Historia ecclesiastica* that Oswald stood godfather for Cynegisl, king of the West Saxons, whose daughter Oswald was later to receive as his wife ('cuius erat filiam accepturus in coniugem' [*Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 1969, iii.7])<sup>6</sup>—generated a bridal-quest and conversion legend, in which Oswald convinces a princess, her father, and his entire people, with the help of appropriate miracles, to accept Christianity. The narrative gap left by the historiographer Bede and the hagiographer Drogo is filled with a plausible sequence of events by an anonymous hagiographer. As one hagiologist has suggested, hagiographers 'resigned themselves to the necessity of making up for deficient sources by writing what seemed to them likely to have happened' (Delehaye, 1961, 69).

Since Oswald needed to be crowned as king, the author produced a coronation legend with material borrowed from the baptismal legend of Clovis.<sup>7</sup> When chrism is found wanting for the consecration, a raven—not Clovis's dove—is sent from heaven with a phial of the consecrated oil. Oswald's courtiers urge him to take a wife for the

<sup>4</sup> For a long time scholars believed that the legends were translations and adaptations of the corresponding legends in the *Passionael*, a Low German translation of the most popular vernacular legendary of the Middle Ages, *Der Heiligen Leben*, but it has been shown that this is not the case. See Kalinke, 1996, pp. 45–77.

<sup>5</sup> See *Acta Sanctorum*, Augusti, II, 5–12. Aug. 5: 'De S. Oswaldo rege ac mart.', 83–103.

<sup>6</sup> According to the twelfth-century 'Vita S. Oswaldi' by Reginald of Durham, her name was Kyneburga (see 'Vita S. Oswaldi Regis et Martyris', *Symeonis monachi Opera Omnia. Historia Ecclesiae Dunhelmensis*, ed. Thomas Arnold [1882–85; Kraus rpt., 1965], vol. 1, p. 349).

<sup>7</sup> See *Acta Sanctorum*, Oct. 1, pp. 146–47.

sake of progeny and the safety of the kingdom—this is in the best tradition of both romance and royal hagiography—and a messenger from heaven announces that God wants him to convert a heathen king and marry his daughter. Thus, Oswald's quest for a wife is explicitly linked to the king's proselytizing efforts and his readiness to suffer martyrdom. Once the raven was introduced into Oswald's legend as the bearer of the coronation chrism, the bird also became the proxy wooer, a task not as remarkable as one might think, if one recalls that traditionally ravens have the gift of speech and also figure in other sacred texts as messengers from God.<sup>8</sup>

The vernacular legend of St. Oswald developed during the same time as or in the wake of the canonization processes of Emperor Henry II (†1024) and Cunegund (†1033), a considerable part of whose popular legend was devoted to Henry's bridal quest and the couple's vow to observe conjugal chastity. This legend may have provided some of the details and structure of the bridal-quest plot of the Oswald legend. Not only the royal status of the saints links them to each other but also their considerable efforts on behalf of the church, as evidenced by the conversion motif in both legends.

Hagiography, like historiography, undergoes fictionalization to account for the lacunae in the historical record. In most instances events are fabricated that we know not to have occurred, but which plausibly could have happened. Occasionally, however, material is introduced that conflicts with the historical record. This is the case with the Oswald legend, which underwent a progressive fictionalization beginning with the incorporation of unattested yet plausible material and culminating in the creation of an ahistorical figure that is the product of an author's fantasy.

The Icelandic *Ósvalds saga* is a translation of a German version that represents the oldest vernacular legend on the continent, which had currency in the German-language area as early as the twelfth century and accompanied the cult of St. Oswald as we know it through the liturgy and Latin hagiography.<sup>9</sup> At some point a rather inventive mind recognized the narrative possibilities of telling only the story of Oswald's bridal quest, and this author produced one of the most outrageous transformations of history into fiction. The author of the German *Oswald*, known as the *Münchner Oswald*, discarded not only the prefatory account of the coronation but also Oswald's martyrdom and the attendant miracles. What was left was a bridal-quest romance in which the point of marriage, that is, progeny, is subverted, because Christ appears to Oswald after the wedding and asks him to abstain from sexual intercourse. That this is a totally fictitious as opposed to a fantastic yet plausible augmentation of

<sup>8</sup> See 'Rabe' in *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, VII: 443, for references to the raven as a wise and advising bird; also Curschmann, 1964, 15-16. Curschmann notes that there is no clear explanation as to how the raven was introduced into the German legend (p. 60, fn. 1) and suggests Reginald's twelfth-century *vita* as a possible source (pp. 174-75). There a large bird is depicted snatching up Oswald's right arm. ('*Vita S. Oswaldi Regis et Martyris*', I: 356). I consider it most unlikely that the inspiration for the raven in the Oswald legend came from Reginald of Durham's Latin *vita* (rather than the account of Clovis's baptism in the legend of St. Remigius of Hincmar of Rheims), especially since the function of the bird is completely different in Reginald's Oswald *vita*.

<sup>9</sup> The argument is fully developed in my book *St. Oswald of Northumbria: Continental Metamorphoses* (2005).

the legend of St. Oswald is the fact that in this German *Oswald* the Northumbrian king eventually dies at the side of his wife in bed. The historically attested martyr was transformed into a confessor saint who had never existed.

While the creation of the bridal-quest plot in the earliest vernacular Oswald legend is merely an attempt by the hagiographer to fill gaps with plausible events, additional fictionalization in the divergent metrical legend, the *Münchner Oswald*, resulted in the creation of an apocryphal saint. In effect, the author of this legend invited his audience to engage in a game of make-believe; he invited his listeners to believe the story he was telling (Curry, 1990, 70). He created fiction rather than hagiography, for he knew very well that he was not transmitting a plausible scenario for the lacunae left by historiography. He asked the audience to conspire with him and to imagine how Oswald might have become a saint had he not died on the battlefield in the cause of Christianization.

A similar process of narrative elaboration and transformation of genre can be observed in the two redactions of *Gautreks saga*. At issue here is not the development of fiction from historiography but rather the development of one fictional type, romance, from another, Märchen, that shares with historiography the propensity to omit certain types of information. In historiography the lacunae derive from lack of information; in Märchen, or folk tales, the lacunae are genre-driven. The text that is commonly referred to as *Gautreks saga* is not the original work but rather the longer, deviating redaction that was first published by C. C. Rafn in 1829–30 and which has been translated into English and other languages. In 1900 Wilhelm Ranisch edited both the older, shorter *Gautreks saga* and the younger redaction. He argued convincingly that the older redaction, which does not contain the *Vikars þátr*, is the original version (pp. XVIII–XL). The original *Gautreks saga* is a folk tale, a bipartite Märchen<sup>10</sup> consisting of the *Dalafífl* and the *Gjafa-Refr þættir*. A comparison of the original *Gautreks saga* with the younger, highly elaborated redaction reveals a process of narrativization and fictionalization with attendant reinterpretation that is comparable to that of *Breta sögur* in the AM 573 redaction and the ‘*Helga þátr*’ of *Hrólfs saga kraka*. The younger *Gautreks saga* reveals a redactor’s attempt, as D. H. Green put it (2002, 193), to make creative use of narrative vacancies in the original folk tale. The lacunae, like those in the ‘*Helga þátr*’, occur in respect to motivation and causation, or, as Elizabeth Ashman Rowe noted, a ‘lack of detail’ that ‘makes the action seem illogical and unmotivated’ (1998, 155, fn.!). In the saga’s first narrative, the ‘*Dalafífla þátr*’, the younger redactor has greatly elaborated the plot in an effort to understand the tale’s ‘internal logic’ (Brewer, 2003, 19) and to rationalize the bizarre and the uncanny in the world of the *Dalafífl*. As Ranisch observed: ‘*Der Bearbeiter, der das Sprunghafte nicht liebt, fügt jeder Handlung ihren Grund bei*’ (*Die Gautreks saga*, 1900, XXXVI).

At the very outset, the younger redactor is compelled to explain why there should be a farmhouse deep in the woods into which King Gauti has strayed.

Í þann tíma var víða bygt, þar sem miklir skógar voru umhverfis, þviat margir menn ruddu mörkina, þar sem fjarlæg var almannaþygd, ok

<sup>10</sup> I would like to acknowledge Michael Chesnutt’s contribution to the remarks that follow, which were inspired by his paper ‘The Content and Meaning of *Gjafa-Refs saga*’ at the symposium ‘Fornaldarsagaerne: Myter og virkelighed’, held in Copenhagen in 2005.

gjörðu sér þar alhýsi sumir, þeir sem flýit höfðu af almannaveg fyrir nokkur sín ranglig tiltæki; sumir flýðu fyrir ljóðæsku eða nokkur æfintýr ok þóttuzt þá síðr spottaðir eða hæddir verða, ef þeir væri fjarri annarra manna athlátri, ok lifðu svó út allan sinn alldr, at þeir fundu øngva aðra menn en þá sem hjá þeim vóru. Þeir höfðu ok margir leitast sér staðar langt frá almannaveg, ok kómu því øngvir menn þá heim at sækja, utan þat varð stundum, at villtuzt á mörkum, at menn hrötuðu þá til þeirra heimkynna, þótt mennn villdu þar gjarna alldr komit hafa. (*Die Gautrekssaga*, 1900, 1–2)

The narrative relates that King Gauti had

álagt svó mikit kapp, at hann hafði af sér kastat öllum klæðum nema linklæðum; berfætr var hann ok hafði øngva skúa, ok hafði víða rifit hans leggi ok iljar bæði grjót ok skógrinn. . . . tekr nú at myrkva af nótt, svó at alldr veit hann, hvert hann stefnir, nemr nú stað ok hlýðir til, ef hann heyrði til nokkurs, ok litla stund hefir hann stað numit, áðr hann heyrir hundzgá, ok þangat gengr hann, sem hann heyrir hundinn geyja, þvíat honum þótti þar hellzt manna vón. (*Die Gautrekssaga*, 1900, 2–3)

None of this is found in the original version, where the isolated farmhouse as also Gauti's divesting himself are simply noted, but without comment or explanation.

If the historiographer omits details, as does Geoffrey in the *Historia regum Britanniae*, it is for want of information. In a narrative like the 'Dalafífla þátr' of the original *Gautreks saga*, however, the lacunae are genre-driven; they obtain from a narrative mode that does not explicate the wondrous, the odd, the marvellous, but rather simply presents these as a given. What might be perceived as gaps in the narrative are occasioned by the folk tale's manner of representation; it does not explain nor does it justify a course of action. The author of the younger redaction, however, was compelled to invent an explanation for every aspect of the story that might have elicited a question, notably the farmer's need to hurl himself off the *æternisstapi*. In the original redaction both the farmer and his daughter say that it is because King Gauti has lodged with them (*Die Gautrekssaga*, 1900, 53–54), but in the younger redaction the father claims that Gauti's visit has plunged the family into poverty:

Með oss hafa orðit býsn mikil, er konungr sjá hefir komit til vórra hýbýla ok etit upp fyrir oss mikla eigu ok þat sem oss henti sízt at láta; má ek ei sjá, at vér megum hallda öllu vóru hýski fyrir takfæðar sakir, ok því hefi ek saman borit alla mína eigu, ok ætla ek at skipta arfi með yðr sonum mínum. (*Die Gautrekssaga*, 1900, 7)

The uncanny behavior and incidents in the Dalafífl community are so thoroughly rationalized in the younger redaction that a fantastic folk tale is transformed into a narrative that inspired a contemporary historian of religion to interpret *Gautreks saga* as dealing with economic practices, with 'the profoundly destabilizing possibilities of incipient capitalism' (Lincoln, 1999, 1812).

As a result of the extensive elaboration in the younger redaction of *Gautreks saga*, the saga subsumes two completely different narrative types, a folk tale and, if you will, a *fornaldarsaga*, the latter if judged by the period into which the events fall, that is, the Scandinavian *forn öld*. It should be noted that the original 'Dalafífla þátr', as is typical of folktales, lacks the dimension of time (Lüthi, 1982, 19)—there is no

mention of Óðinn—and the single reference to what might be construed as geography is the introduction of Gauti as ruler of Gautland (p. 50).

The author of the younger *Gautreks saga* does not offer an apologia for his revisionist narrative, as did, for example, the author of the younger *Mágus saga*, who justifies composing a deviating, expanded version by implicitly criticizing the author of the older redaction:

skilur því mest á um frásagnir, að þeir sem rita eða segja þær sögur, er þeim þykir skammt um talað, er orðfærir eru, þá auka þeir með mörgum orðum, svo að þeim, sem skilja kunna, þykir með fögurum orðum fram bornar, sem áður voru sagðir með ónýtum orðum. (*Mágus saga jarls*, 1953, 428)

Yet, by its very existence the younger *Gautreks saga* implies its author's criticism of the older narrative. Like the authors of the *Úther/Ygerna* tale in the AM 573 redaction of *Breta sögur*, the 'Helga þáttur' of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, and the vernacular Oswald legend, who were dissatisfied with the incomplete stories left by the historiographers, the author of the younger redaction of *Gautreks saga* was displeased with the terse and fragmentary account of the folk tale. While he did not create fiction as such, for the folk tale is a fictional genre after all, he did transform one type of fiction that shares a number of stylistic characteristics with historiography into a narrative type presumably more attuned to the tastes of the time and his own aesthetics of storytelling.

Whereas only a few texts could here be adduced for the generation of fiction in the North, comparative analyses of historiographical texts and related *fornaldarsögur*, for example, or comparative studies of the variant redactions of a saga would, I believe, prove to be productive for furthering our understanding of the creation of fiction in the North.

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