

Siân E. Grønlie. *The Saint and the Saga Hero: Hagiography and Early Icelandic Literature*, Studies in Old Norse Literature (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2017). Print, 306 pp., £70.00, ISBN: 9781843844815.



Review

Intertextuality in Old Norse-Icelandic Saga literature – particularly how sagas interact with Latin learning – has been a matter of ongoing debate. In this volume, Siân Grønlie brings an innovative new perspective to the discussion, examining the creative relationships between saga and saint's life through the lens of polysystem theory. Importantly, and central to the book, Grønlie does not perceive hagiography as a foreign genre imposing religious motifs on a native literature. She argues, rather, that hagiography was mainstream literature, fundamental to the Icelandic intellectual culture that informed saga authors, and therefore to the development of saga literature.

The book presumes reader familiarity with Icelandic saga literature and, to an extent, ignorance of hagiography as a literature. Thus, Grønlie opens the volume with an overview of the development of hagiography from the origins of Christianity to the Middle Ages, emphasising its plurality as a literary mode and its manifestation across 'genres'. She follows this with an examination of hagiography in Iceland, its rapid adoption as a vernacular literary mode, and the interest such texts may have held for saga authors as 'heroic biographies' that were, to some degree, analogous to the stories of Iceland's native heroes. Only with this background firmly established does Grønlie turn to polysystem theory, the methodological framework underlying her analysis.

Polysystem theory, in essence, problematises the idea of genre. As Grønlie notes, saga genre and the categorisation of Old Norse-Icelandic literary texts have been under significant revision over recent decades by scholars focused on intertextuality and cultural memory. She

suggests polysystem theory as a better model for understanding the specific relationship between hagiography and saga. Here different ‘genres’ interact within the one literary system, each shifting between the centre and the periphery within a theoretical variable hierarchy, informed by authorial and societal concerns at the time of any text’s composition. This, then, allows for the relationship between saint’s life and saga to be ‘complex and dynamic’ (p. 32) and, above all, correlative. Grønlie variously describes the literary modes as being in ‘competition,’ in a state of ‘struggle,’ or even being characterised by ‘interference.’ These are technical terms in the parlance of polysystem theory, however, to my mind they seem to reflect an aggression that does not come out in Grønlie’s text (indeed, she concludes the book with a note on her discomfort with the word ‘interference’ in describing the saint’s life–saga relationship). Rather, the relationship that comes into view in this book is one in which tension and friction facilitated correlative and creative approaches to content. In short, when applied to the saints’ lives and sagas of medieval Iceland, polysystem theory describes a fruitful literary dialogue.

Individual examples of this dialogue and application of polysystem theory comprise the bulk of the book. Indeed, Grønlie goes on to some rather bold comparative analyses, reading Egill Skallagrímsson (who must surely appear the antitype of the saint), Hrafnkell Freysgoði, Þorkell krafla, and Gísli Súrsson (among numerous others) in the light of hagiographical narrative. Fortunately, chapter 2 eases the reader into such analyses with a more explicit and canonical exemplar of the blended saint’s life/saga: *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*. In Grønlie’s estimation, while Oddr Snorrason’s late twelfth-century composition may have been intended as a vita of the Christian king of Norway, he ultimately fails in this aim. Nonetheless, the creative friction between saint’s life and saga is explicit in the pages of *Óláfs saga*, and what we are left with is a heroic Christian king. In some ways it is a character well balanced between the two literary traditions, if

not always dealt with adeptly by Oddr. However, as Grønlie highlights, Oddr was at the leading edge of not just saga authorship, but of genre experimentation in Old Norse-Icelandic intellectual culture. The style becomes more refined over the subsequent century.

In chapter 3 Grønlie identifies hagiographical archetypes in *Egils saga* and *Hrafnkels saga*. In *Egils saga* she locates numerous examples where religious motifs are appropriated and inverted, serving to parody the traditional saint's life. Yet she posits a complex relationship between *Egils saga* and such religious writings, noting that some of the more evident biblical analogues, as well as the closing *translatio* narrative, seem to lack such parody. *Hrafnkels saga* in turn is shown to parallel Christian didactic literature, though in such a manner as to be considered subversive. Here we see the tension between the centre and periphery literary modes Grønlie identifies in her definition of polysystem theory.

Chapter 4 takes the Icelandic conversion as its central theme and examines three well-regarded *Íslendingasögur* in which it features: *Vatnsdæla saga*, *Njáls saga*, and *Eyrbyggja saga*. Grønlie's interest in these texts is on the liminal nature of their narrative: how they attempt to construct a pagan past and a Christian present, and the ways in which saga authors sought to resolve conflict between pre- and post-conversion eschatology.

Chapter 5 also considers three sagas, though *Gísla saga* takes up much of its length, undertaking a comparative reading of Icelandic outlaws and early Christian desert saints. At face value this may seem an odd comparison, yet Grønlie is convincing as she identifies common *topoi* in these folk-heroes who inhabited the fringes of society, challenging that very society's norms.

Finally, chapter 6 returns to Óláfr Tryggvason and, inevitably, also draws the sainted King Óláfr Haraldsson into the discussion. As both Óláfrs make frequent appearances throughout the

saga corpus – providing political and historical context to the narrative settings – the analysis here ranges across a large selection of *Íslendingasögur*. Grønlie takes on the axiomatic saga hostility toward kingship, and concludes that, though some friction in narrative modes exist, the saga authors are not averse to engaging with the construct of the saintly king. We ‘cannot approach the *Íslendingasögur*’, she exhorts us, ‘in a literary vacuum’ (p. 257).

The Saint and the Saga Hero has been a pleasure to read and review. It is a book well served by Grønlie’s evident attention to detail, innovative approach to intertextuality, and patient and thoughtful approach to medieval ‘genre.’ This volume adds a valuable new perspective to the study of Old Norse-Icelandic texts and their interaction with, and place within, wider European literary endeavours.

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