

Bjarni Guðnason. *Túlkun Heiðarvígasögu*. Studia Islandica 50. Reykjavík: Bókmenntafræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1993. 287 pages.

In approaching Bjarni Guðnason's *Túlkun Heiðarvígasögu* it should be borne in mind that it is a late product of the Icelandic school, which for the last sixty years or so has focused on the written record, assumed that literate "authors" consciously shaped each of the extant Íslendingasögur, and ignored the claim (and its growing significance) that they developed out of an oral culture. What this suggests about the book under review is that — even aside from the language in which it is written — no experienced scholar would doubt its author's nationality nor his generation. What this does not mean, on the other hand, is that it ought to be met with measured indifference, for in some ways it breaks with the school's approach and will stimulate specific discussion of this much-neglected but fascinating saga as well as of the sagas in general.

Bjarni disagrees with the traditional view of *Heiðarvíga saga* as a clumsy narrative account of feuding and reads it instead as a subtle Christian allegory. Bjarni argues that the author was less interested in history than in propagating an idea: killing, whether the thirty-three twisted acts of the psychopathic Víga-Styrr or the revenge exploits of Barði, violates God's law, results from the strong hold paganism exerted on saga characters and even thirteenth-century Icelanders, and threatens the perpetrators with eternal damnation unless their evil deeds are expiated. Everything in the saga — events; characters; their names, words, and deeds; even place-names — serves the saga's allegorical ends. Like any literary code, allegory disguises its message, and Bjarni's major contribution to an understanding of the saga is his attempt to crack the code.

First, he stresses the importance of King Óláfr's rejection of Barði because of his *forneskja*, by which Óláfr means neither the practice of paganism as such (Barði is, after all, a Christian) nor individual acts of black magic (Bjarni convincingly refutes this

charge), but rather Barði's revenge killings and his belief in his "own might and main" (59). St. Óláfr condemns these acts because he himself no longer practices them ("vér höfum þat [i.e., forneskja] svá mjök frá oss skilit"). Aside from specific arguments, all of them worthy of debate, one problem with this interpretation is the importance placed on Óláfr's words, which might seem to some readers a late accretion to the saga (see, e.g., Sigurður Nordal in his edition of *Borgfirðinga sögur* [Íslenzk fornrit 3 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933), cxxxvi]). For Bjarni they echo the author's own convictions, voice the thematic core of the saga, and represent its final judgment towards which the author's crafting inevitably points. Bjarni avers that the author regarded St. Óláfr as God's proxy on earth (49) — and thus the most powerful Nordic spokesman for Christian doctrine — but, if so, one might wonder what dogma the king would be expressing when in *Fóstbræðra saga* chap. 24 (Íslenzk fornrit 6:259) he chastizes Þormóðr for excessive bloodtaking, only then to approve his killings after Þormóðr misleadingly claims that such revenge had been taken on those who had compared him to a mare among stallions. Bjarni cites this analogue but does not explore its implications (56). Even if Bjarni correctly interprets authorial intention, where does the king's hypocritical stance — saint or not, he repudiates violence without relinquishing its fruits — leave us? Shouldn't God be more careful about his choice of proxies?

Bjarni then turns to a discussion of Þuríðr's *hvöt* (incitement) and her *ofanför* (an allusion to God's descent to earth and her plunge into the brook). Regarding Þuríðr and St. Óláfr as thematic opposites, Bjarni adds an important chapter to the recent literature on the *hvöt* topos (Clover, Jochens, Miller, none of which he mentions). The similarities to and differences from other types are meant to show that Þuríðr's whetting characterizes her as a heroine of pagan cast bent on revenge at any cost (77). Likewise, his discussion of Þuríðr's *ofanför* stresses her manic revenge ethic. But in his glossing of names and his choice of alleged parallels (83–91) — especially that drawn between Þuríðr's falling into the brook and

Pórr's crossing the river Vimr — Bjarni expands the parameters of ingenuity to the breaking point. I am sceptical of his glossing of “symbolic” names on the grounds that sometimes a cigar is just a cigar; Bjarni's choice of “parallels” at various stages of his book is uneven, and on occasion they undercut his points. Nevertheless, he makes the sensible observation that Þuríðr's whetting is largely superfluous: Barði and his brothers had long since completed their preparations for their journey of revenge before she launches her attack. The whetting's significance remains a problem, but one that Bjarni deserves credit for highlighting.

From Þuríðr Bjarni turns to the Christian figurations and their opposites. He points out that Guðlaugr Snorrason, as a man of God, is exempted from revenge-taking. The case for Gestr as a Christian figure, on the other hand, rests on the putative analogical character of the biblical David's saga. Both figures are favored by God: Gestr's killing of Víga-Styrr can be excused on the same grounds as David's slaying of Goliath (some men's enemies are God's enemies); Gestr enjoys God's protective hand during Þorsteinn Styrsson's three attacks as does David when under threat from Saul; Gestr's mildness towards Þorsteinn demonstrates the saga's main theme, the superiority of forgiveness over revenge in achieving peace. I can think of two or three objections — for some saga figures killing them is the only answer; David is a type of *kolbíttr*; showing mercy to an enemy with your foot on his neck may be a sign of pride (think of Sámr and Hrafnkell); forgiving an enemy is easier when he has been thrice reduced to grovelling. However, in expanding Theodore M. Andersson's point about *ójafnaðarmenn* in general and Víga-Styrr in particular (“The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family sagas,” *Speculum* 45 [1970]: 580–81), Bjarni's discussion verges on staving in unlocked doors, and his contention that the posthumous Víga-Styrr's soul is in the snares of the devil (134) smacks of the fundamentalist preacher.

Bjarni's characterization of Barði (“the Beater”) Guðmundarson as a man of excess in opposition to Andersson's view of him as a man of moderation will prove controversial, but Bjarni makes his case with gusto.

He sees Barði as not very bright, deceptive, unethical, and hypocritical in conducting his lawsuit (he is, on the other hand, prosecuting a lawsuit against recalcitrant opponents); his divorcing Guðrún (his first wife) signifies that revenge is often visited upon the innocent and shows that Barði's temperament prevents his settling the lawsuit peacefully; his second divorce demonstrates that gratitude, consideration, tolerance, forbearance, and love are foreign to his nature. But Bjarni does recognize that Barði “is two men in the saga”: on the one hand, heedful in following his mentor's advice, but on the other mocking and vindictive in his dealings with Þórðr melrakki, so that neither his brother's death, nor his father-in-law's parsimony, nor a considerate or aggressive wife is necessary to drive him to revenge (149). Barði is a fighter in peace and war (151), but he differs from Víga-Styrr, who kills for the love of it, whereas Barði in following the laws of men breaks the laws of God. God refuses Víga-Styrr a place in his court, just as St. Óláfr rejects Barði (153). Thus, Barði is a warning to Christian men, whereas Gestr is a “guiding star” (158). In my view this interpretation attributes to saga characterization an anachronistic psychological dimension. Víga-Styrr would be objectionable in any society and condemned by all ethical systems. Moreover, the Gestr episode shows how power in the right hands, not mercy, preserves peace. Finally, perhaps two traditional Barðis have been crudely stitched together — as if the bad Hrútr from *Laxdæla saga* and the good Hrútr from *Njáls saga* appeared as one in a **Breiðafjarðarvíga saga*.

In order finally to demonstrate the saga's advocacy of peace Bjarni touches on three apparently unrelated features (159–74): *griðamál* ‘truce formulations’, the character Eiðr Skeggjason, and the place-name *Gullteigr* ‘Peace-Meadow’ (172). The *griðamál*, rather than an unaesthetic intrusion, is the author's clearest formulation of his theme; Eiðr, Þuríðr's thematic opposite, is the author's spokesman for peace; the meadow of peace is where the peace-breaker, Barði, kills Gísli (a type of hostage) according to the pattern established by Víga-Styrr. Bjarni rounds off his discussion of the saga per se by establishing a saga trinity of ages: (1) the

first is one of paganism and strife; (2) the second a period of Christianity in which Barði, a backslider, ruptures the peace; (3) the third is the future, a time in which peace reigns and people follow God's law and live in harmony (174).

If the meaning Bjarni teases out of *Heiðarvíga saga* was intended, then I wish the saga author had not been quite so subtle. I do not read Gestr as one of the chosen nor Víga-Styrr and Barði as God's enemies; nor am I persuaded by many of the other elaborate attempts to interpret parts of the saga in this mold. (Not even all parts of an allegory are allegorical.) I understand how a cleric might have wished to Christianize the saga without being persuaded that one has in fact done so. I can also imagine how a medieval cleric might have used the saga as a text for a sermon whose message was the one Bjarni sees in the saga. But at issue here is where sermonizing ends and literary scholarship begins.

The rest of Bjarni's deliberations are the Icelandic school at its least useful: determining cross-current influences of one saga upon another in order to date the saga. Collectively, the members of the Icelandic school have said enough dubious things about the "age" of the sagas to qualify them as the used-car salesmen of the field. Bjarni is good at poking holes in the arguments of those who date the saga to about 1200, but then goes on to offer a later date; he is still wedded to the idea — for good reason virtually abandoned by scholars in other branches of medieval literature — that stylistic elegance tells us something about a work's date (the literary-tradition-as-tulip theory; sagas bud, bloom, blast). And he still practices the this-is-like-this and that-is-like-that brand of comparison of saga bits, a method which, as Andersson pointed out thirty years ago, often fails to identify significant similarities (*The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins* [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1964], 96–103). Sagas resemble each other not because of direct borrowing but because, as Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg have argued (*The Nature of Narrative* [London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966], 43), they are the product of an oral tradition where authorship in the modern sense plays a secondary

role. (A saga author would no more have created an original saga than Bjarni could have made up an original Icelandic language in which to write his book; in both cases, though, something different and never before achieved was the happy result.) Bjarni's discussion of direct speech (195–98) is wonderfully instructive, and it is a pity that he did not use his sensitivity to the language to discuss style as such rather than bending his insights to fit a tendentious dating of the saga. Rather than disagreeing with Nordal and Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Bjarni might have confronted the mountain of evidence gathered from living oral traditions that tells us so much about the habits of oral storytellers. So many things might then have taken a different direction.

Predictions are risky, but I nevertheless wager that Bjarni's conclusions will receive mixed reactions: I can see many scholars of his generation flatly rejecting his interpretation, while the encroaching generation will love his treatment of the saga as allegory even while disagreeing at various points; many of those stuck in the middle (as well as in their ways), for whom the Íslenzk fornrit editions and the writings of Turville-Petre represent the Old and the New Testaments of literary theory, respectively, will be fleeing reading rooms everywhere, convinced a 7.9 Richter-scale earthquake is upon them. Cooler heads should read it in disbelieving joy and then reread all the Íslendingasögur with it in mind. Here is that rare book, written by a man who has forgotten more about the sagas than most of us will ever know, that teaches and delights by going over the top. Bjarni's approach, insights, conclusions, and general implications for saga scholarship deserve to be widely debated and made part of the ongoing discourse.

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