

Leeds Studies in English

Article:

Arnold R. Taylor, 'Laxdaela Saga and Author Involvement in the Icelandic Sagas', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 7, (1974), 13-21

Permanent URL:

https://ludos.leeds.ac.uk:443/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=121837&siloleft=GEN01



Leeds Studies in English
School of English
University of Leeds
<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/lse>

LAXDAELA SAGA AND AUTHOR INVOLVEMENT IN THE ICELANDIC SAGAS

By ARNOLD R. TAYLOR

Laxdæla saga has recently attracted detailed consideration by many eminent scholars who have concerned themselves either with the date of composition or the name of its author.¹ What I have to say will also relate to the author, though I am not concerned with his name nor with the rival claims of Sturla Þórðarson or any other writer for so proud a position. My interest lies more in what motivated him and made him write in the way he did. Njörður Njarðvík, in a perceptive and sensitive article, has touched on the same subject but from a different point of view. He concentrates more on the saga author's interest in contemporary events and the relevance of what he had to say on the social life of his times; I am more concerned with his interest in the past.

Let us look first at the problem of the author's involvement or lack of involvement in the finished product.² Usually it has been said that the Icelandic saga author keeps himself in the background, that he refrains from comment upon the actions of his characters, that he prefers to give a cinematographic, eye-witness account of the action, and leaves his readers to draw their own conclusions on the characteristics and motives of his people. I believe such statements to be substantially true if we confine ourselves to explicit comment on the author's part and are prepared to admit that this seeming lack of involvement is secondary and only real as a deliberate, and remarkably effective, literary device. As is well known, there are a few general exceptions to this avoidance of intrusion on the part of the author. It has often been pointed out that when a person who plays any considerable part in the story is first introduced a short description is normally given of his or her characteristics, both physical and moral. We may perhaps add that this is the basis upon which the saga author builds and that his subsequent portrayal of the character is but an amplification, an explication, a colouring-in of this introductory portrait. A typical example of this is the picture given of the chieftain Hrafnkel in Hrafnkels saga freysgoða.³ Occasionally also the author will intrude an opinion of his own in the guise of popular

or public comment. Sometimes this is explicit enough: the author will say in comment on an action that something or other mæltist or taldist illa fyrir; sometimes the comment is partly veiled, e. g. in Hákonar saga góða, after the fall of Egill ullserkr in the battle at Fræðaberg, one chapter ends with the words Hávir bautasteinar standa hjá haugi Egils ullserks (Tall memorial stones stand beside the burial mound of Egill ullserkr).⁴ Snorri Sturluson not rarely permits himself such an aside in order to give his own opinion of an action. The author of Njáls saga is very fond of this device: in his account of the death of Gunnar he is able to say ok soggðu þat allir menn at hann brygði sér hvártki við sár né við bana (but everyone is agreed that he flinched neither at wounds nor death itself); he makes Rannveig comment Illa ferr þér ok mun þín skömm lengi uppi (You are an evil woman and your shame will long be remembered); and he finally lets Gissur sum up the whole action with Mikinn öldung höfu vér nú at velli lagit, ok hefir oss erfitt veitt, ok mun hans vörn uppi, meðan landit er byggt (We have felled a great champion, and we have not found it easy. His last defence will be remembered as long as this land is lived in).⁵ But it is unnecessary to enumerate further examples; you must all have come across many of them. In a very interesting and informative article on this subject of intrusion Paul Schach, in addition to noting the opinions of commentators in the past, suggests five ways in which the saga author commonly shows his own involvement, and in case we may feel that his evidence is slight he rightly adds the useful caution that further evidence of author involvement may well have been removed from our surviving texts by subsequent scribes and copyists who notoriously did not always treat their exemplar with the respect which later generations might have preferred.

I have suggested above that the seeming lack of intrusion is really nothing but a literary device. All of us are aware both of the author's presence and of the reality of his involvement. Every writer or artist must reflect his times, not only in his choice of material but also in his techniques. One might therefore ask both why the saga author generally preferred to adopt the technique of the "outside observer" and also where he got it from. These are big questions and merit detailed consideration, and hence an investigation of them is far beyond the scope of this paper. But clearly the choice is partly dictated by the fact that the thirteenth-century Icelandic author is employing techniques which he inherited from the oral storyteller. Unlike the modern author, who can make his confidential appeal to a single reader, he is addressing not one person but many. In medieval times, whether we are thinking of the homilist, the saga writer or the composer of heroic story in verse, the audience of one was rare, and it was the storyteller's duty to involve not so much himself as his audience in what was

happening. And so, by seeming withdrawal, the saga writer was aiming at a definite effect; by his seeming non-intervention the author is bound to abrogate the necessity for judgment and moral comment upon his characters, but equally he is bound to hand over the responsibility for judgment, both moral and aesthetic, to his audience.

Such a device is by no means rare in other medieval authors, for it is in effect one facet of a characteristic common to most extant Old English and Old Icelandic literary remains. In the Old English poem Beowulf, for example, we are early left in no doubt as to the outcome of the story, that tragedy lies ahead. We know that although the hall of King Hrothgar will be cleansed by Beowulf, his efforts will be in vain, for the hall, like the farm at Bergþórshváll, will go up in flames and the dynasty of the Scyldings - the Skjöldungar - will be destroyed. In the same way it is clear in the late Old English poem The Battle of Maldon that the English cause is lost long before Byrhtnoth, their leader, falls, and that success in the material sense will not be achieved by his followers, though their greatness of heart and heroism may compensate somewhat for their tragic failure.

Now it may well be that this literary device, so common in Old English and Old Icelandic literature, of hinting at the outcome of the story is the direct result of the fact that the content of the story was often already known to the audience, so that there could be no virtue - as in a modern production such as the detective novel - in deliberately hiding the outcome in order to build up tension and excitement; this last could be better done by constantly reminding the listener that he already knew the tragic points of the impending disaster. Under medieval circumstances it was useless for the storyteller to put himself forward as the omniscient power behind the narrative who grudgingly, yet cunningly, hands out carefully calculated snippets of information until such time as all is revealed. He must rather create the excitement in another way, involve his audience and make the listener the creator of excitement and tension by forcing him to call to mind the varied small details of the story to come. This he does by hinting at the future, sometimes even by prefiguring the whole story in some way, as for example in Gunnlaugs saga. To sum up then, I believe that this literary device although generally described as "lack of author intrusion," might equally well, if not better, be thought of as a device aimed at "audience participation."

But it is now time to return to Laxdæla saga. Dreams are commonly used in saga writing both to prefigure the story and to build up tension; examples immediately spring to mind in Gunnlaugs

saga, Gísla saga, Droplaugarsona saga and many others. But perhaps nowhere are they employed more prolifically or more successfully than by the author of Laxdæla. There are in all nine dreams used in the story, some much more aptly than others. There is the dream of Ólafr about Harri the ox which, as has often been pointed out, serves as a keystone in the build-up of tension before the death of Kjartan.⁶ There are the two dreams of Án hrísmagi, one before and one after the battle in Svínadalr; they are used as a sort of emphasizing bracketing of the most important episode in the story. There is the dream of Þorkell Eyjólfsson which is variously interpreted by himself and by his wife Guðrún, and the dream of Herdís Bolladóttir about the disturbance at the chapel at Helgafell. In addition there are the four dreams which prefigure the marriages of Guðrún.

Professor Foote has pointed out that there are different stages in the development of Laxdæla: that it begins and remains down to chapter thirty-two a family chronicle, that after chapter thirty-two Guðrún takes over and it is the story of her loves and marriages, and the consequences of them, that we remember.⁷ Professor Foote implies that there is a later return to the family chronicle once the pre-ordained marriages have taken place; though that there is a return to the family chronicle is only partially true, since for the modern reader at any rate - and I suspect for the thirteenth-century Icelander - the whole of the story, after her introduction, is dominated by Guðrún.

Nevertheless such a structure is natural enough and has precedent in an earlier saga, that of Egill Skallagrímsson. There, also at first, the family chronicle prevails, for we are not told of the birth of Egill before chapter thirty-one. Thereafter Egill dominates the story, though it would probably be true to say that the co-ordination in Egils saga is stronger, since it is at least his family that the first thirty chapters concern. Unlike those of Guðrún, Egill's adventures take place for the most part abroad, but late in the saga he too returns to his family and lives out his life to old age. It is interesting to note the fact that the old age of the "heroic" Egill and of the "heroic" Guðrún are by no means secondary elements in the sagas but are dwelt upon at some length, and it is equally interesting that both authors add another factor, one that would seem likely to destroy completely the early image of a heroic character, namely, blindness. I think it is a noteworthy achievement in both authors that they manage to keep our interest in heroic figures in decay and to maintain to the very end the outstanding, gigantic nature of their main characters. The resemblance in structure between the two sagas is so striking that, although I have no wish to enter on the controversy of the literary influences on Laxdæla saga, there seems to me little doubt that its

author, at some time in his life, must have read Eigla or listened to a reading of it.

It is only natural that the saga author of the earlier half of the thirteenth century - and his successors in the latter half - should use the family chronicle form; it was imposed upon him by tradition, by the love of genealogy in the nation, by the historical precedent of the Lives of the Norwegian kings but above all by the temper of the times, which would make any saga inadequate if it lacked at least mention of the Landnáma forebears of its hero. The commonwealth needed its heroic founders to maintain its prestige and standing in troublous times, and though the modern reader may feel such a lengthy treatment to be a tedious and unnecessary preliminary it was in their day an essential part of the story. But the authors of both these sagas were particularly attracted to the single heroic figure, the author of Eigla as a result of his interests in continental monarchy and court poetry, and the author of Laxdæla because of the earlier heroic verse of the Elder Edda.

As everyone has realized, the love of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir for Kjartan is intended to parallel that of Brynhildr for Sigurðr; as W. P. Ker has said, the old story was modernized in the aristocratic rural society of western Iceland.⁸ Guðrún herself is a composite of Brynhildr, who died glorifying in and grieving at the vengeance she had achieved, and of her namesake Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, who demanded and attained so ruthless a vengeance for her family on her husband Atli and on her son-in-law Jormunrekr. Our author must indeed have been greatly attracted to this story, for in making it the basis of his saga he subordinates almost everything, including his family chronicle introduction, to its theme. Kjartan is developed into a new tragic Sigurðr and Bolli into a Gunnar, but not, I would suggest, for their own sake but to the greater glory of the woman Guðrún.

That this was the author's intention is made clear by the introduction and positioning of Guðrún's dreams, which are told within a page or so of her first introduction and which could be regarded not only as motivating elements in the development of the story but also as the first climax of the tale. Professor Andersson, in accordance with his scheme, would make Kjartan's death the climax of the story, and in one sense, of course, he is right.⁹ But it is not the only climax; there are a whole series of them in this saga, the slaying of Bolli, Guðrún's final confession and the earlier chapter in which the four dreams are interpreted. At this point a peak has been reached in the story which turns out to be the beginning of a plateau, dominated perhaps but not overshadowed by those later peaks of tragedy and revenge. The author

prepares very carefully for this chapter, in a way in which another man less personally involved in the story of Guðrún might not have done: he subordinates the earlier part of his story to it and indeed uses the latter part of his chronicle element as a threatening prelude. The scene has been set on the male side by the fostering together of Kjartan and Bolli, the instrument of slaughter is provided by the baleful acquisition of the sword Fótbrít, innocently given to her cousin by Kjartan's sister, and a direct threat against Kjartan is presaged by the introduction of the first dream - of Harri the ox. Ólafr's dream is deliberately mysterious. Who is this woman who threatens him? The very question suggests the only possible answer - a figure of folktale brought in, not too elegantly but with perfect timing, to bring to fulfilment the necessary build-up of tension before the entry of the female protagonist.

The single chapter which follows brings the whole story into focus, for Gestr Oddleifsson, the sage, is able to foretell her four marriages from her dreams and later also the tragedy which Ólafr will have to face in the loss of his son at the hands of his foster brother.

The four dreams are fulfilled - in outcome at least, but not as literally as one may expect. Normally in the sagas the details of a prophetic dream are carefully observed and the event mirrors its interpretation. One might say that this is true of the first three of Guðrún's dreams, for from them we learn of her attitude towards and estimate of her first three husbands; and one might therefore have expected the fourth to follow suit. But either our author is too expert to account for every detail and by so doing to make a monotonous reality of an exciting, suggestive prophecy, or else we have here an instance of the character actually taking over from the author who cannot bring himself to permit the reality of Gestr's interpretation:

Sá er inn fjórði draumur þinn, at þú þóttisk hafa hjálm á höfði af gulli ok settan gimsteinum, ok varð þér þungbærr; þar munt þú eiga inn fjórða bonda. Sá mun vera mestr höfðingi ok mun bera heldr ægishjálms yfir þer . . .¹⁰

In your fourth dream you dreamed that you were wearing on your head a helmet of gold set with precious stones, and you found it heavy to bear; this means you will have a fourth husband. He will be the greatest chieftain of them all, and he will dominate you completely . . .

It may be, of course, that at this stage in the writing of his story the author intended to show Guðrún in her fourth marriage as a woman overawed by so great a chieftain. But if so, it is evident that he changed his mind. He later finds that he cannot allow his heroic female figure, whom he so much admired, to be belittled by any man, for on the very day of her wedding-feast he deliberately retails the story of her defiance of this husband over the affair of Gunnar Þiðrandabani. On this occasion it is Snorri goði who points out what an exceptional woman Guðrún is: Máttu sjá, hversu mikill skörungr Guðrún er, ef hon berr okkr báða ráðum (You can see for yourself what an exceptional woman Guðrún is, when she gets the better of both of us);¹¹ and her superiority is cleverly emphasized by a further dream. Þorkell dreams that his beard covers the whole of Breiðifjörður and interprets the dream to his own advantage by suggesting that it means he will be overlord of the whole district; but Guðrún remembers - and recalls to the reader after the passage of so many years and so many pages - her own dream, which like the rest of the dreams spells tragedy, and we know that Þorkell will drown.

This leaves one final dream upon which to comment, and it is important for our purpose. It is the dream of Herdís Bolladóttir that her grandmother, Guðrún, now in her Christian character of a nun and in her old age, is still powerful enough to disturb and overcome the powers of paganism and evil in the form of a sorceress buried under the floor of the church at Helgafell.¹² Like the dream of Ólafr after the killing of Harri the ox, this dream is pure folk-tale, but it is used by the author to good, though very different, purpose. For at this stage in his story he is nearing the end. Þorkell, Guðrún's fourth husband, is dead and her prophesied destinies fulfilled, and something is now needed to bolster up the anticlimax before the final scene where Guðrún at last admits the love which has motivated so many of her actions and a great deal of the story. It is not sufficient for our author to see her, as he had formerly seen Kjartan, as a protagonist for Christianity, though he had this point at heart too, as had many another saga author of the thirteenth century. He must also show her as successful in this new role, in order that her stature should remain high and be remembered before the memorable scene when she makes confession to her son.

My reading today of our author's purpose has been based upon his use of dreams, and in summing up I should like to stress my two main points. Whether the author was Sturla Þórðarson or some other of the Sturlung clan we shall probably never know, but we know him to have been a good Christian, a man of his own age, of thirteenth-century Iceland, yet one who also welcomed the new world typified by romance;¹³ his saga also tells us that he still

found no necessity to reject that old world of heroism which he found so attractive in the poems of the Elder Edda. It is interesting, indeed, to note that for the modern reader it is this element in his story which still appeals; it is this element which remains timeless. Secondly, may I revert to my first thesis of author involvement. Too often when the expression "writer intrusion or the lack of it" is used it does not seem to be appreciated that the Icelandic author of the thirteenth century is as involved in his material as any modern storyteller, that the device of withdrawal, real though it is, does not reflect the attitude of the author towards his subject-matter but is a literary artifice to enable him to put across his story to a multiple audience in the most effective way he knows. Professor Schach in his article made clear that he was talking of explicit "author intrusion,"¹⁴ but Professor Lönnroth was equally right to stress the implicit involvement of the saga writer.¹⁵ It has been demonstrated that the author of Laxdæla was greatly concerned with the questions of his day, but let us not forget that the saga writer's main purpose was to tell a good story, and in order to do this he had to become involved with his characters. The author of Laxdæla showed this in Guðrún. He became himself so involved in this story of a woman - as no other saga writer ever did - that once she was on the stage he was unable to leave her, and nearly every incident is introduced to colour and enliven her portrait. In so doing he proved himself to be one of the most interesting and self-revealing authors of thirteenth-century Iceland.

NOTES

This paper was originally written for delivery to the Second Icelandic Saga Conference in Reykjavík, 1973. Minor alterations have been made.

- 1 (a) Various articles by R. Heller, mainly concerned with the connection of the saga with other Icelandic sagas, in ANF (1960, 1961, 1962, 1965).
- (b) R. Heller, Laxdæla saga und Königssagas (Halle, 1961); "Neue Wege zur Verfasserbestimmung," Forschung und Fortschritte, 41 (1967), 239 ff.; "Das Alter der Laxdæla saga," ZDA (1968), 134-155.
- (c) P. Hallberg, "Ólafur Þórðarson hvítaskáld, Knytlinga saga och Laxdæla saga," Studia Islandica, 22 (1963).
- (d) M. Mundt, Sturla Þórðarson und die Laxdæla saga (Oslo, 1969).
- (e) N. P. Njarðvík, "Laxdæla saga - en tidskritik?," ANF, 86 (1971), 72-81.

All references to Laxdæla saga are to the edition by E. Ó. Sveinsson in Íslenzk Fornrit, V (Reykjavík, 1934). Translations from Laxdæla saga are from Laxdæla Saga, trans. Magnusson and Pálsson (London, 1969). Translations from Njáls saga are from the same translators' Njal's Saga (London, 1960).

- 2 See (a) Paul Schach, "Some forms of writer intrusion in the Íslendingasögur," Scand. Stud., 42 (1970), 128-156 and (b) Lars Lönnroth, "Rhetorical Persuasion in the Sagas," Scand. Stud., 42 (1970), 157-189.
- 3 Hrafnkels saga freysgoða, ch. 2, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, Íslenzk Fornrit, XI (Reykjavík, 1950).
- 4 Hákonar saga góða, ch. 27, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson in "Heimskringla I," Íslenzk Fornrit, XXVI (Reykjavík, 1951).
- 5 Brennu-Njáls saga, ch. 77, ed. E. Ó. Sveinsson, Íslenzk Fornrit, XII (Reykjavík, 1954).
- 6 Laxd. s., ch. 31.
- 7 The Laxdale Saga (London, 1964), pp. ix ff.
- 8 W. P. Ker, Epic and Romance (London, 1897), p. 209.
- 9 T. M. Andersson, The Icelandic Family Saga (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), pp. 163-74.
- 10 Laxd. s., ch. 33.
- 11 Laxd. s., ch. 69.
- 12 Laxd. s., ch. 76.
- 13 This point is clearly demonstrated by E. Ó. Sveinsson in the introduction to his edition. See especially pp. v-xxiii.
- 14, 15 See articles listed in note 2 above.