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THE ACADEMIC AND THE DEVIL

By A.R. TAYLOR

Icelandic folklore, in common with that of many other countries, has long associated learning, particularly academic learning, with magic and usually with the wiles and works of the devil. The life of the academic is a perilous one; the devil will always try to claim his own.

The earliest recorded example in Iceland of this universal and deep-rooted persuasion is to be found in *Jóns saga helga*, where the saintly Bishop Jon manages to reclaim Sæmund the Wise for Iceland after he has spent many years abroad, and in so doing clearly saves him from the devil.¹ In later folktales also Sæmund, the first Icelander to seek formal education abroad, and his knowledge there obtained are represented as inseparable from the works of the devil. He escapes from his clutches by various artifices and even after his return to his native Oddi is constantly harassed by Satan and his minions, though his great learning invariably gives him the final victory. Sæmund Sigfússon (1056-1133) and Jon Ogmundsson (1052-1151), bishop of Holar, were contemporaries, and *Jóns saga* was written in the first years of the thirteenth century by Gunnlaug Leifsson, a monk of the Benedictine monastery at Thingeyrar in northern Iceland.

In one of the surviving versions of *Jóns saga helga* the story of Sæmund's escape is told as follows:

Þá er hinn heilagi Jón biskup var í Suðrvegum, sem fyrr segir, gat hann upp spurt ok með sér haft Sæmund hinn fróða á þann hátt sem hér segir. Eigi hæfir annat en geta, framarr en áor er sagt, hversu mikit lió íslenzkum mönnum varó at hinum heilaga Jóni, jamval utanlands sem innan. Teljum vér þann hlut einkanliga þar til, er hann spandi út higat með sér Sæmund Sigfússon, þann mann, er verit hefir einhverr mestr guós kristni til nytsemdar á Íslandi, ok hafði lengi verit í útlöndum, svá at ekki spuróist til hans. En hinn heilagi Jón gat hann upp spuróan, at hann var með nokkurum ágætum meistara, nemandi þar ókunniga fræði, svá at hann týndi allri þeirri, er hann hafði á æsku aldri numit, ok jamval skírnarnafni sínu. En er hinn heilagi Jón kom þar, er hann var fyrir, spuróði hvárr annan at nafni. Hinn heilagi Jón sagóði sitt nafn, en Sæmundr nefndist Kollr. Jón svarar af gípt heilags anda ok mikilli kennispeki: "ek getr, at þú heitir Sæmundr ok sér Sigfússon, ok fæddr

á Íslandi, á þeim bæ er í Odda heitir". Taldi hinn heilagi Jón þar til fyrir honum, at hann kannaðist við sík ok ætt sína. Sæmundr mælti: "vera má at sönn sé saga þín, ok ef svá er, þá man finnast í túninu í Odda höll nokkurr, sá er ek lék mér jafnan við". Ok eptir þetta, þá kannast þeir við með öllu. Þá mælti hinn heilagi Jón: "fýsir þik ekki í brott hédan?" - Sæmundr svarar: "gott þikkir mér hjá meistara mínum, en þó, síðan ek heyrða þín orð, ok ek sá þik, virðist mér þó svá, sem sá hafi betr, er þér fylgir ok aldri við þik skilst, en eigi sér ek þó ráð til þess, at ek mega þér fylgja, þvíat meistari minn vil með öngu móti gefa mik liðugan". Hinn heilagi Jón mælti: "vit skulum báðir þar at sitja, ok man ek dveljast hér um hríð; skulum vit til nýta hverja stund, er vit megum við talast, eigi síðr nætr en daga. Nú ef meistari þinn ann þér mikit, þá man hann leita okkar, ef vit erum einir saman, ok man hann þá venjast við ok þikkja ekki grunsamligt, ef þat kemr opt at. En ef hann léttir af at leita okkar, þá skulum vit leita á brott sem skjótast". Sæmundr mælti: "vitrligt ráð er þetta, er þú hefir til lagt, skal þetta grundvöllr okkarrar ráðagerðar, en við vitran mann eigum vit, þar sem meistari minn er, því at hann sér ferð okkra þegar hann hyggr at himintúnglum í heiðríku veðri, þvíat hann kann svá algerla *astronomiam*, þat er stjörnufrótt, at hann kennir hvers manns stjörnu, þess er hann sér, ok hyggr at um sinn". Nú eptir þessa ráðagerð fylgir Sæmundr Jóni á fund meistara síns; tók hann við honum allval, er Jón þar um hríð, þar til er þeir leita á brott á einni nátt; var veðr þykkt, ok fara þá nótt alla ok daginn eptir. En er meistarinn saknar þeirra, þá var þeirra leitað ok fundust þeir eigi. En á annarri nátt, þá sá öll himintúngl, sér meistarinn þegar hvar þeir fara, ok ferr eptir þeim skyndiliga. Sæmundr leit í loptið upp ok mælti: "á ferð er meistari minn kominn, ok sér hvar vit förum". Jón mælti: "hvat er nú til ráða?". Sæmundr svarar: "skjótt skal til ráða taka: tak skó af fæti mér ok fyll af vatni, ok set í höfud mér". Svá gerir hann. Nú er at segja frá spekinginum, at hann sá í himininn upp ok mælti: "ill tíðindi! þvíat Jón hinn útlenzki hefir drekt Koll, fósra mínum, þvíat vatn er um stjörnu hans"; ok ferr heim aptr. En þeir Jón fara leið sína þá nótt ok daginn eptir. Nú er enn at segja frá spekinginum, at á næstu nátt eptir skipar hann himintúnglum, ok sér stjörnu Sæmundar fara yfir honum lifanda, ok ferr eptir þeim Jóni. Sæmundr mælti: "enn er stjörnumeistarinn á ferð kominn, ok man enn ráða við þurfa; tak enn skó af fæti mér ok kníf or skeiðum, ok högg á kálfa mér, ok fyll skóinn af blóði, ok set í hvirfil mér". Jón gerir svá. Þá gat meistarinn enn sét stjörnu Sæmundar, ok mælti: "blóð er nú um stjörnu meistarans Kolls, ok er nú víst at þessi útlendingr hefir fyrirfarit honum"; ok þí hverfr hann aptr leið sína. En þeir Sæmundr ok hinn heilagi Jón fara sinn veg framleiðis. Þat er enn at segja, at þá er þessi hinn

fróði meistari kom heim, reyndi hann list sína enn af nýju, ok sá enn stjörnu Sæmundar ok mælti: "á lifi er enn Kollr, lærisveinn minn, er betr er, en nógu mart hefir ek kent honum, þvíat hann sigrar mik nú í stjörnuíþrótt ok bragóvísi sinni, ok fari þeir nú heilir ok val, þvíat ekki get ek á moti staðit þeirra brottferð, ok mikils man Jóni þessum auðit verða, ok langaligar nýtjar munu menn hafa hans hamngju". En þeir Jón fóru leiðar sinnar, ok fórst þeim val ok greiðliga.²

[When, as related above, the saintly Bishop Jon was on his pilgrimage to Rome he managed to trace and bring back with him Sæmund the Wise just as is told here. It would be but right to say a little more than has already been done about the great help given by the saintly Bishop Jon to Icelanders both abroad and at home. A particular example of this was when he persuaded Sæmund Sigfusson to return to Iceland with him - Sæmund, a man who has been one of the most useful of men in the service of God's Christianity in Iceland, but who had been abroad for a long time without anything being heard of him. But the saintly Jon was able to discover his whereabouts, that he was living with a certain excellent teacher, studying with him lore so recondite that he had forgotten all that he had learned in his youth, even his baptismal name.

Now when the saintly Jon came to where he was, they asked each other for their names. The saintly Jon told his, but Sæmund said that he was called Koll. Through the gift of the Holy Ghost and through his great powers of recognition Jon answered "My guess is that your name is Sæmund and you are the son of Sigfus and were born in Iceland on a farm which is called Oddi". The saintly Jon reasoned with him until such time as he recognised who he was and acknowledged his kin. Sæmund said "It may be that what you say is true, and if so there must in the home-field at Oddi be a mound near which I used to play". After that they fully recognised each other.

Then the saintly Jon said "Aren't you eager to get away from here?" Sæmund answered, "I like it here with my master, but yet since seeing you and hearing what you have to say it seems to me that he is better off who accompanies you and never parts from you. Yet I can see no way for me to go with you, for my master will on no account give me leave".

The saintly Jon said "We'll both think the matter over and I shall stay here for a time. We shall take every opportunity to talk together, no less at night time than in the day. Now if your master is really fond of you, he will search us out if we are on our own together, and he will get used to the idea and not think it suspicious if it happens often. Then if he should cease to look for us we shall try to make our escape as quickly as possible". Sæmund said "That is a good idea you have come up with. It

shall be the basis of our plan, but we are up against a clever man in my master, for he will be able to see us on our journey when the sky is clear and he gazes up at the stars, because he is so skilled in *astronomia* - that is star-lore - that he recognises everyone's star provided he can see it and looks at it for a time".

Now after they had made up this plan Sæmund took Jon to see his master, who made him very welcome. Jon stayed there for a time until, one night, they made their escape. The sky was overcast, and they travelled all that night and the following day. When the master missed them a search was made, but they were not found. On the next night all the stars were visible in the sky. The master immediately saw the way they were going and went after them with great speed. Sæmund looked up into the sky and said "My master has set off and he can see where we are going". Jon said "What shall we do now?" Sæmund answered "We must act quickly. Take the shoe from my foot, fill it with water and put it on my head". He did so.

Now to tell of the sage; he looked up at the sky and said "Evil are the tidings, for the foreigner Jon has drowned my fosterson Koll; there is water around his star". And he went back home again. But Jon and his companion continued their journey for that night and the following day.

Now to tell once more of the sage; on the next night he conned the stars in the sky and saw the star of Sæmund travelling above him as over a living man, and he set out after him and Jon.

Sæmund said "Once more the astrologer is on his way and once more we must take action against him. Take the shoe from off my foot again and take my knife from its sheath. Cut the calf of my leg and fill the shoe with blood and put it on the top of my head". Jon did so.

Then the sage once more looked up at Sæmund's star and said "There is blood now around the star of Master Koll, and it is now certain that this foreigner has done away with him". And so he turned back in his tracks. But Sæmund and the saintly Jon went forward on their way.

Now it is still to be reported that when this wise man reached home he once more put his arts to the test and again saw Sæmund's star and said "Koll, my pupil, is still alive, and that is good; but I have taught him more than enough for he surpasses me now in star-craft and cunning. Let them go now, safe and sound, for I can't prevent their escape. This Jon must be very gifted and his great gifts will bring lasting benefits to men".

Jon and Sæmund continued their journey and all went well for them.]

It will be noticed that the devil is not specifically mentioned and Sæmund escapes only from the toils of academic enslavement. The story here told, since it is embodied in the saga of a man which was intended to bring about his beatification, is basically a cautionary

tale shewing how the scholar, eager for every kind of learning, can be saved by the saint whose desires are bounded by the narrower confines of Christian knowledge.

It has long been recognized that this story about Sæmund has its parallel in a story told by William of Malmesbury about Pope Sylvester the Second. The connection, as far as I know, was first pointed out by Halldor Hermannsson in a postscript to his essay on Sæmund, and he there claims William's story as the actual source.³ It is perhaps worth while to set the two accounts side by side - the relevant part of William's account runs as follows:

Silvester, qui et Gerbertus, ex Gallia natus, monachus a puero apud Floriacum adolevit: mox cum Pythagoricum bivium attigisset, seu tædio monachatus, seu gloriæ cupiditate captus, nocte profugit Hispaniam, animo præcipue intendens ut astrologiam et ceteras id genus artes a Saracenis edisceret. . . . Ad hos igitur, ut dixi, Gerbertus perveniens desiderio satisfecit. Ibi vicit scientia Ptholomæum in astrolabio, Alandreum in astrorum interstitio, Julium Firmicum in fato. Ibi quid cantus et volatus avium portendat, didicit; ibi excire tenues ex inferno figuras; ibi postremo quicquid vel noxium vel salubre curiositas humana deprehendit: nam de licitis artibus, arithmetica, musica, et astronomia, et geometria, nihil attinet dicere; quas ita ebibit ut inferiores ingenio suo ostenderet, et magna industria revocaret in Galliam omnino ibi jam pridem obsoletas. Abacum certe primus a Saracenis rapiens, regulas dedit quæ a sudantibus abacistis vix intelliguntur. Hospitabatur apud quendam sectæ illius philosophum, quem multis primo expensis, post etiam promissis, demerebatur. Nec deerat Saracenus quin scientiam venditaret; assidere frequenter, nunc de seriis, nunc de nugis colloqui, libros ad scribendum præbere. Unus erat codex, totius artis conscius, quem nullo modo elicere poterat. Ardebat contra Gerbertus librum quoquo modo ancillari. Semper enim in vetitum nitimur, et quicquid negatur pretiosius putatur. Ad preces ergo conversus orare per Deum, per amicitiam, multa offerre, plura polliceri. Ubi id parum procedit, nocturnas insidias temptat. Ita hominem, connivente etiam filia, cum qua assiduitas familiaritatem paraverat, vino invadens, volumen sub cervicali positum arripuit, et fugit. Ille somno excussus, indicio stellarum, qua peritus erat arte, insequitur fugitantem. Profugus quoque respiciens, eademque scientia periculum comperiens, sub ponte ligneo, qui proximus, se occulit; pendulus et pontem amplectens, ut nec aquam nec terram tangeret. Ita quærentis aviditas frustrata domum revertitur. Tum Gerbertus, viam celerans, devenit ad mare. Ibi per incantationes diabolo accersito, perpetuum paciscitur hominum si se, ab illo qui denuo insequeretur defensatum, ultra pelagus eveheret. Et factum est.⁴

[Silvester, also called Gerbert, was born in Gaul and

grew up from boyhood as a monk at Fleury. Soon afterwards, when he was approaching years of discretion, either weary of monkhood or seized by the desire for glory he fled by night to Spain with the express purpose of learning astrology from the Saracens

Accordingly, as I have said, Gerbert coming to this people satisfied his desires. There in knowledge he out-rivalled Ptolemy with the astrolabe, Alandreas in the disposition of the stars, and Julius Firmicus in judicial astrology. There he learned what is portended by the song and flight of birds, how to rouse up the insubstantial figures from hell, and finally whatever the curiosity of human beings has seized upon, whether damaging or beneficial; for it is unnecessary to mention the lawful arts - arithmetic, music, astronomy and geometry, (all of) which he absorbed so thoroughly that he shewed them to be beneath his natural abilities. Also with great industry he revived them in Gaul, where for a long time they had been completely obsolete. He was certainly the first to seize the abacus from the Saracens and formulated rules which are with difficulty understood by toiling calculators. He had taken lodging with a certain philosopher of that sect, and he gained his goodwill first by great expenditure but later on by promises. Nor was the Saracen unwilling to sell his knowledge, supplying books for copying and frequently sitting and entering into discussion of matters both serious and trivial. There was one volume containing all his art which he could never manage to lay hands on. Yet Gerbert was inflamed with desire to obtain this book by any possible means. For always we strive for the forbidden, and whatsoever is denied is thought more precious. Therefore he turned to entreaties, to beseeching for the love of God, for friendship sake, to offering much and promising more. When this was of no avail, he tried trickery by night. Thus with the connivance of the daughter, whose intimacy he had obtained by his attentions, he plied the man with wine and snatching the volume from under his pillow he fled. The Saracen, jolted out of his sleep, pursued the fugitive by the direction of the stars, in which art he was an expert. The fugitive also, looking back, realised his danger by the same arts and hid himself under a nearby wooden bridge, clinging to it and hanging in such a way that he was in contact with neither the water nor the earth. Thus the eagerness of the pursuer was frustrated and he returned home. Then Gerbert, hurrying on, came down to the sea. There summoning the devil by his incantations he promised to be his loyal servant for ever if he would save him from the man who was once more pursuing him and transport him over the sea. And so it was.]

If we now compare the two the basic similarity is obvious, but the exact nature of the connection between them is far from clear. In both stories a man seeks knowledge from abroad; in the case of

Gerbert the branches of learning are detailed, whilst of Sæmund it is simply said that he is studying 'recondite lore'. Both men eventually flee their master but their flight is made clear to him through his knowledge of the stars, yet both escape using the very arts taught to them by their pursuer. There are, however, differences between the two stories. Gerbert, with the connivance of a seduced daughter, escapes on his own after stealing a book of learning from under his master's pillow, whilst Sæmund escapes only with the help of Bishop Jon. Gerbert's theft is reminiscent of a folk-tale told in the *Snorra Edda* in which Odin steals the mead of poetry for the gods with the help of Suttung's daughter Gunnlod.⁵ A further difference is that Gerbert avoids capture by the single artifice of suspending himself under a bridge, whilst Sæmund has to make greater and more frequent efforts to escape and his master eventually despairs of catching him. Gerbert in order to cross the sea has to call upon the devil and pledge his soul. Sæmund and Jon simply go their way. It would be unthinkable for the saint to invoke the devil's aid.

These similarities and differences suggest that if William's account of Gerbert's education was the source for the Sæmund episode then considerable modification took place. Halldor Hermannsson, as pointed out above, claimed that it was the source, but since he could produce no other evidence for the knowledge of William's history in Iceland in the early thirteenth century he was forced to conclude that the tale was brought to Iceland by word of mouth, and he even suggests the possibility that it was Sæmund himself who told the tale of Gerbert's escape from the Saracen. It might appear that the use of the Latin word *astronomiam* in the Icelandic of the saga points to a Latin source - and therefore William's history - but such an argument loses much of its force for two reasons. Firstly in the corresponding position in William's Latin we find not *astronomia* but *indicium stellarum* and secondly because *Jóns saga* itself was originally composed in Latin, though the Latin text has been lost and only Icelandic translations have survived. The present text therefore can only be a paraphrase not of William's but of Gunnlaug's Latin, though there is nothing to say that Gunnlaug did not substitute *astronomiam* for *indicio stellarum*.

Einar Ólafur Sveinsson also thinks it likely that the account of Sæmund's escape came to Iceland as an oral story, but he gives no reasons.⁶ That the story existed in Iceland in an oral form cannot be denied, for variant versions have survived and typical alternative stratagems to effect escape have been recorded. In the version sent in 1701 to Arni Magnusson in Copenhagen, who was collecting material for a life of Sæmund the Wise, the devil was again deceived by Saint Jon.⁷ He knew that the devil 'takes the hindmost' and, making Sæmund precede him, when leaving the school wore his cloak loosely about his shoulders. The cloak was the devil's only reward. In this same seventeenth-century tale Sæmund makes a sporting compact with the devil, tricks him on three successive nights and thus earns immunity. Versions from the nineteenth century repeat the stratagem of the cloak but also add another variant in which the devil is told to snatch at Sæmund's shadow which follows him out.⁸ Other late versions do their best to combine all earlier stratagems.

Some of the elements in William's story are found in other Icelandic folktales, though they are not necessarily connected with Sæmund. A story reminiscent of that of the Sorcerer's Apprentice, in which the pupil is unable to reverse a spell but is rescued by the return of his master, is told of Bishop Jon Halldorsson (†1339) who shews interest in a book of wizardry,⁹ and two such books, *Greyskin* and *Redskin*, are important elements in the well-known tale of *Galdra-Loftur*.¹⁰ The transporting by the devil of Gerbert over the sea reminds one of Sæmund's other compact when the devil, in the form of a seal, returns him to Iceland in double-quick time.¹¹ Most of these later versions are composite in their material and undoubtedly oral in their origin and transmission. Bjarni Einarsson in his excellent commentary on the early folktales accepts the close connection between William's story of Gerbert and *Jóns saga*, but he feels doubtful about direct literary borrowing and prefers to think of the stories as two variants of the common migratory tale of master and pupil.¹² If William is the ultimate source, the fact that there is already variation from him in Gunnlaug's story suggests that oral contamination took place in the very earliest stages.

Probably the evidence for a decision on this point is not yet available, but there is no doubt that whatever story it was that brought to Iceland the thesis of the equation of academic learning and the precepts of the devil it was particularly fruitful. An extraordinary late reflection is the debasement of the great St Columba, the founder of Durrow and Iona, who in the opening chapter of Halldor Laxness' novel turns up as the Icelandic fiend Kolumkilli.¹³

In conclusion we may draw the moral *caveat academicus, caveat Artur*, for 'if a little learning is a dangerous thing' how much more so must be great learning. Let us hope, now that he has retired, that Arthur too has escaped and no longer needs beware.

NOTES

- ¹ *Biskupa Sögur*, 2 vols., (Copenhagen, 1858-78), I, pp.215-60.
- ² *Jóns saga helga*, Chs. 15 and 16 in *Biskupa Sögur* I, pp.227-29. Another translation of this passage can be found in *The Northmen Talk*, trans. Jacqueline Simpson (London, 1965), pp.70-73, which also contains other extracts from *Jón's saga*.
- ³ Halldór Hermannsson, "Sæmund Sigfusson and the Oddaverjar", *Islandica* xxii, (New York, 1932), pp.51-52.
- ⁴ William of Malmesbury, *De Gestis Regum Anglorum*, ed. W. Stubbs, (London, 1887), pp.193-95 (Rolls Series 90). I should like to acknowledge the help in making this paraphrase given to me by my former colleague, Mr R.L. Thomson, but must myself accept full responsibility for any inaccuracies. The reader will recognise that there are difficulties, but fortunately those which do arise are not crucial for the points of comparison I wish to make. Other translations of this passage can be found in (a) William of Malmesbury, *Chronicle of the Kings of England* (London, 1866), pp.172-74, (Bohn's Antiquarian Library), and in (b) William of Malmesbury, "History of the Kings of England", trs. J. Sharpe, rev. Jos Stevenson, in *Church Historians of England*, (London, 1854), III i, pp.150-52.
- ⁵ *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, (Reykjavík, 1949), pp.103-05. In translation - *The Prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson*, selected and trs. by Jean I. Young (Cambridge, 1954), pp.101-03. Bjarni Einarsson, "Munnmælsögur 17. Aldar", *Íslenzk Rit Síðari Alda* VI (Reykjavík, 1935), p.civ.
- ⁶ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Um Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur*, (Reykjavík, 1940), p.68.
- ⁷ Bjarni Einarsson, *op.cit.*, p.39-40. Also in Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur og Evintýri*, 2nd ed., 6 vols., ed. Árni Böðvarsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, (Reykjavík, 1954-61), I, pp.469-70. There is a translation of this version in *Legends of Icelandic Magicians*, trs. Jacqueline Simpson with an introduction by B.S. Benediktz, (The Folklore Society, 1975), pp.19-20.
- ⁸ Jón Árnason, *op.cit.*, I, pp.475-86. For translation of some of these tales see Simpson, *Legends*.
- ⁹ "Þáttur Jóns biskups Halldórssonar", *Biskupa Sögur*, I, pp.483-96. Also in *Íslenzk Evintýri*, ed. Hugo Gering, 2 vols., (Halle, 1882-83), pp.84-94. This latter also contains another story about Pope Silvester which according to Gering (Vol. II, p.33) is taken from Martin von Troppau, who in turn took it from Vincent of Beauvais.
- ¹⁰ Jón Árnason, *op.cit.*, I, pp.572-75. Translated in Simpson, *Legends*, pp.73-79.
- ¹¹ Jón Árnason, *op.cit.*, I, p.478. Translated in Simpson, *Legends*, p.24.
- ¹² Bjarni Einarsson, *op.cit.*, p.civ. The full commentary on the Sæmund legends occupies pp.xcvi-cxix.
- ¹³ Halldór Kiljan Laxness, *Sjálfstætt Fólk*, I, (Reykjavík, 1934) and in translation Halldór Laxness, *Independent People*, trs. J.A. Thompson, (London, 1945).