



This Rough Magic

A Peer-Reviewed, Academic, Online Journal

Dedicated to the Teaching of Medieval and Renaissance Literature



The Icelandic Sagas as a Subject for Undergraduate Study

Author(s): John P. Sexton

Reviewed Work(s):

Source: *This Rough Magic*, Vol. 3, No. 1, (June 2012), pp. 69-78.

Published by: www.thisroughmagic.org

Stable URL: <http://www.thisroughmagic.org/sexton%20article.html>

The Icelandic Sagas as a Subject for Undergraduate Study

By John P. Sexton

While medieval studies has dramatically expanded its scope and the texts taught as part of its subject over the past few decades, the study of Icelandic saga literature is still a fringe discipline, particularly in North American academe. Rarer still is undergraduate exposure to the sagas, despite their appeal as texts and the rich possibilities they offer to students trained in Anglo-Saxon literature (or at least *Beowulf*) and familiar with Norse myth and legend through Tolkien or Marvel comics. The insular nature of the culture from which the literature springs is a contributing factor, of course—there is the undeniable ring of truth to Milan Kundera’s assertion that “(a)lthough the glory of the Sagas is indisputable, their literary influence would have been much greater if they had been written in the language of one of the major nations; and we would have regarded the Sagas as an anticipation or even the foundation of the European novel.”^[1] Yet this isolation need not, and should not, prevent their inclusion in the literary canon as it is presented to our students. In my experience, the sagas fit well into survey courses on Western, pre-modern, or epic literature, and sustain more detailed inquiry in dedicated courses on Northern European medieval literature and on

the sagas as a subject of study in their own right. Unsurprisingly, saga readings can be used to generate discussion and analysis through nearly any critical lens—work on the sagas and gender, law, historicity, disability studies, manuscript studies, formalism, mimetic theory, religious history, ecocriticism, cultural studies, and other topics is ongoing. Of equal or greater value to an undergraduate classroom, the sagas reward careful reading and introduce a type of dispassionate but narratologically rich writing that many students respond to with great enthusiasm.

In what follows, I will briefly examine several possibilities for incorporating the sagas into a survey course before considering the advantages of a full course dedicated to saga literature.

Adding a single saga into a survey course on works of Western Literature, Northern European Literature, or Epic Literature is, in most cases, a realistic goal for those teaching such courses. The choice of text depends on the circumstances of the course and the other materials or anthologies being used, though a serious engagement with Icelandic literature will almost certainly require adding a separate text to a course reading list.^[2] *Hrafnkels saga* is a popular choice for such a course, as it is short enough to include easily in the reading schedule, offers a straightforward narrative, and boasts an outsized amount of critical attention. Other sagas offer several points of entry from the British or Western Literature canon. *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* and *Hrólfs saga Kraka*, two of the more well-known possible analogues to *Beowulf*, can be read in part or in

their entirety alongside the Anglo-Saxon poem to provide context or to prompt debate about the proof for and against a connection between the texts—Andy Orchard’s *Pride and Prodigies* chapter “Grendel and Grettir Again” and Magnús Fjalldal’s *The Long Arm of Coincidence*, provided in excerpts as a preparation to writing position papers, can stir up surprisingly impassioned arguments from students. Even without this context (or in a course designed around chronological progression in which the texts would not be read consecutively), introducing saga literature can open students’ eyes to the Northern European world (too frequently ignored) with which the British Isles were engaged throughout the medieval period.

Another possibility is the inclusion of either of the sagas telling of the Icelanders’ exploration of and settlement in North America c. 1000 A.D. (*Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grœnlendinga saga*). The introduction of Leif Eirikson’s journey to “Vinland,” the Icelanders’ interactions with the indigenous peoples of North America, and the disastrous end of the settlement in treachery and bloodshed present to students new ways of thinking about their received ideas of western history (even as they raise questions about the reliability of historical narrative). These sagas also raise questions of the depiction of the cultural Other in medieval writing through the saga-writers’ descriptions of the natives of Vinland, providing an introduction to critical analyses of texts that avoids timeworn subjects.

A third option is to introduce one of the loosely-categorized “outlaw” sagas, which center on a figure who is placed under legal outlawry and must outwit and evade those who would bring him to (often corrupt) justice. *Gisla saga Surssonar*, *Grettis saga*, *Áns saga bogsveigis*, and *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja* are all available in translation, and offer intriguing points of comparison with the English traditions of Robin Hood, Gamelyn, Fouke fitz Waryn, and their fellow outlaws.^[3]

A fourth possibility, if course structure allows, is to include *Egils saga Skallagrimssonar* as a stand-alone text. Among the finest sagas in terms of artistic achievement, *Egils saga* also offers through its eponymous protagonist a remarkable portrait of a complex and difficult figure. Egil is a formidable warrior and an accomplished poet, but also an antisocial brute with asymmetrical features (likely due to Paget’s Disease)^[4] and a tendency toward un-saga-like displays of emotion. Egil’s life story includes his descent from generations of shape-shifters and berserks (inviting discussion of the culturally-specific demands of normativity) and his travels to England (where he, along with his brother and other displaced Scandinavians, take part in the Battle of Brunanburh, inviting comparisons with other historical accounts of that battle). The widely-accepted attribution of *Egils saga*’s authorship to the Icelandic chieftain and writer Snorri Sturluson also invites discussion of one or more of the author’s other works, including the *Heimskringla*, a cycle of lives of the Norwegian kings, and the *Prose Edda*, a collection of materials on Norse poetry and mythology.

Introducing a saga into the reading schedule can enrich a survey course, but the ideal approach is to devote a full course to the material. The mythology, textual intricacies, and historical and cultural contexts which inform the sagas can then be brought to students' attention. Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* provides an excellent starting point for such a course, particularly the first section, the "Tricking of Gylfi" (*Gylfaginning*), in which a disguised king is told stories of the Æsir, the Norse pre-Christian gods. The stories were written in the thirteenth century for a nominally Christian audience, and preserve legends and poems about the Æsir that, though already faded in Snorri's day, deeply inform the sagas that he and others wrote of Iceland's past. The gods are partly recast as legendary heroes linked to both ancient Troy and the East. Students grappling with the *Edda* are faced with a text written by a Christian which reconfigures the pagan traditions of Scandinavia to fit into a Christianized and Europeanized view of the past, though whether it does so in service of Christianity, nationalism, paganism, antiquarianism, nostalgia, or some combination of motives is still a matter for debate. The course begins, then, with careful considerations of authorial motivation and the reliability of a text's apparent aims.

The sagas themselves reward study in a full-length undergraduate course for a number of reasons. One is that the texts link together intentionally. The historicity of the Icelanders' sagas creates a tapestry of interwoven narratives, demanding careful attention to (and retention of) the details of one text as students encounter another.^[5]

Many figures (Harald Fair-Hair, Snorri Goði, Aud the Deep-Minded, etc.) appear repeatedly, allowing students to see different facets of their personalities as they appear in various saga-writers' works. I find that my students appreciate the challenge and the reward of developing an understanding of these figures across several texts over the course of the semester. This aspect of saga-study can be enhanced by careful formation of the reading list. While reading *Gisla saga*, for example, students encounter a "murder mystery" as the saga author carefully constructs a pivotal passage so as to hide the identity of a killer:

Now a certain person goes in [to the house at Hól] before daybreak, silently, and moves to the spot where Vestein lies. He was waking already, but he felt sooner he saw the spear before his chest, so that it stuck through him. When Vestein felt the thrust, then he spoke: "It struck there," he said. And then the silent man went out. And Vestein tried to raise himself up, but he fell down beside the bed-board, dead.^[6]

Vestein's murder begins a chain of retaliations that drive the entire saga, as each figure acts on his or her beliefs or knowledge about the murderer's identity. A second saga (*Eyrbyggja saga*) casually names the murderer (or, at least, that writer's opinion of the murderer's identity), while several other sagas (including *Njals saga* and *Bandamanna saga*) make mention of the victim's son's failure to take appropriate revenge. Reading texts in one order allows students to consider not only the subjectivity of narrative, but also the claims to historicity made by the sagas (and other apparently

non-fiction writing). Reversing the order, on the other hand, encourages students to think about the formal elements of saga-making and the pressures placed on historical “knowledge” by narrative convention. Once students apprehend the value in importing one text’s narrative, structure, and motifs into the process of reading the next, their responses and eventual research become naturally informed by issues of genre and literary context.

The sagas encourage and even demand analysis from a variety of perspectives, and their generally dispassionate style seems to assume a sophisticated readership capable of historical and artistic inference. The historical realities surrounding the sagas’ creation add another layer to the texts. The Icelanders’ sagas were written in a period during which the independence which had defined Iceland’s character was in decline. Small numbers of powerful chieftains (*storgoðar*) dominated the island, consolidating authority and conducting feuds that escalated into local wars which threatened to tear the island apart. Norwegian money and power came to exert influence over the island as well (Snorri Sturluson was, in fact, assassinated in the course of these international intrigues). The 1262-64 capitulation of Iceland to Norwegian control was the final step in the loss of a way of life. The saga authors, whose active period encompasses the decades before and after the capitulation, write from a variety of perspectives and with varying degrees of subtlety about the island’s past in juxtaposition with its present,

requiring students to adopt an interdisciplinary approach to decoding the complex emotion beneath the often stoic surface of saga narrative.

Several obstacles make teaching a full course on the sagas a challenge, but these are easy enough to overcome. An introductory-level research library can be built at relatively little expense, an advantage of the relatively modest amount of material published on the subject.^[7] Translations of nearly all the sagas are readily available in recent translations, and one compendium volume, Penguin's *The Sagas of Icelanders*, is very affordably priced for course usage. Perhaps the most difficult problem is successfully advocating for a course on the subject of medieval Icelandic literature. It is my experience, however, that such a course generates sufficient word-of-mouth among students that subsequent opportunities to teach the material are much more easily obtained.

Endnotes

[1] *The Sagas of Icelanders*. Introduction by Robert Kellogg. New York: Penguin, 2000. Kundera's assessment is included as a jacket blurb with the volume.

[2] The major anthologies more or less ignore Icelandic literature. The second edition of the *Longman Anthology of World Literature* offers no material on Iceland or the sagas; neither does the third edition of the *Norton Anthology of World Literature*, though the eighth edition of the *Norton Anthology of Western Literature* includes the short tale (or *páttir*) of *Thorstein the Staff-Struck*.

[3] *Gisla saga* and *Grettis saga* are both widely published individually, and are also available in a packaged volume with *Harðar saga* in the reissued *Three Icelandic Outlaw Sagas* edited by Anthony Faulkes (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004). *The Saga of Án Bow-bender* is available in a translation by

Shaun F. D. Hughes and is included in Thomas Ohlgren's *Medieval Outlaws* (West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2005). A possibility not discussed in this article is the ease with which a Medieval British and Icelandic course on outlaw literature can be constructed. A useful resource for organizing a course around outlaw literature is Alexander Kaufman's article, "Teaching Medieval Outlaws," in *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching* 15.1 (2008): 105-132.

[4] Jesse Byock. "Skull and Bones in *Egils saga*: A Viking, A Grave, and Paget's Disease." *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 24(1993):23-50.

[5] I use the word 'historicity' advisedly here. The nature of history in the sagas has been widely debated; though the texts are clearly not documentary in nature, they preserve verifiable historical detail and sit comfortably in neither the "fiction" nor the "non-fiction" categories.

[6] "Nú er gengit inn nokkut fyrir lýsing, hljóðliga, ok þangat at, sem Vésteinn hvílir. Hann var þá vaknaðr. Eigi finnr hann fyrr en hann er lagðr spjóti fyrir brjóstit, svá at stóð í gegnum hann. En er Vésteinn fekk lagit, þá mælti hann þetta: "Hneit þar," sagði hann. Ok því næst gekk maðrinn út. En Vésteinn vildi upp standa; í því fellr hann niðr fyrir stokkinn, dauðr." Þórólfsson, Björn, and Guðni Jónsson, eds. *Vestfirðinga Sogur*. Íslenzk Fornrit series Vol. 6. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1943. Translation is my own.

[7] The most recent iteration of my course on Icelandic sagas was fortunate enough to receive a small "course embedded course grant" to support undergraduate research from the Adrian Tinsley Program at Bridgewater State University, which was used to purchase a set of secondary materials. These materials, some seventeen volumes of scholarship, were then donated to the University's campus library to be available for future course sections, an arrangement which materially benefitted the course's students, the campus, and the profile of saga studies at the University. I wish to thank the ATP for their generosity.

Works Cited

The Saga of Án Bow-bender. Trans. Shaun F. D. Hughes. *Medieval Outlaws*. Ed. Thomas Ohlgren. West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2005. 290-337.

The Sagas of Icelanders. Intro. by Robert Kellogg. New York: Penguin, 2000.

Three Icelandic Outlaw Sagas. Ed. Anthony Faulkes. Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004.

Byock, Jesse. "Skull and Bones in Egils saga: A Viking, A Grave, and Paget's Disease." *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 24(1993):23-50.

Fjalldal, Magnus. *The Long Arm of Coincidence: The Frustrated Connection between Beowulf and Grettis Saga*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998.

Kaufman, Alexander. "Teaching Medieval Outlaws," in *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching* 15.1 (2008): 105-132.

Orchard, Andy. *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf Manuscript*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003.

Pórolfsson, Björn, and Guðni Jónsson, eds. *Vestfirðinga Sogur*. Íslenzk Fornrit series Vol. 6. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1943.