

Carnegie Mellon University

From the Selected Works of Gloriana St. Clair

2014

Out of the saga now

Gloriana St. Clair



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/gloriana_stclair/39/

Out of the saga now
a section of my autobiography *Trapped in the Outhouse*

Gloriana St. Clair, May 2014

“There was a man named Ketil, nicknamed the Large.” This formulaic sentence begins the *Saga of the People of Vatnsdale* and others like it grace a body of literature written in medieval Iceland between 1190 and 1320 to record history and the lives of early Icelanders (930 to 1030 CE). The relationship between these sagas (saga means writing) and the work of J.R.R. Tolkien was the topic of my doctoral dissertation and has continued to be my passion. My upcoming May 22nd trip to Iceland will offer the opportunity to see historical locations related to *Laxdale saga*, the *Saga of Grettir the Strong*, and the *Sturlunga saga* about the northwestern quarter of Iceland. These sagas continue to fulfill the primary mission of all literature by educating and entertaining simultaneously. Three qualities of sagas are noteworthy: strong women, understatement, and Icelandic nationalism.

As professional Scandinavian Garrison Keillor says about Lake Wobegon, “the women are strong.” Icelandic women, who can trace their genealogy back to the characters in the sagas, have impressive role models. Aud the deepminded, the foremother of my librarian friend Sigrun Clara Hannesdottir, was one of the original settlers. When her husband was killed in Scotland, she had a ship built secretly and settled the family in northwestern Iceland where she held the role of a chieftain in the 900s. At an elaborate wedding feast for her grandson, Olaf Peacock, she greeted guests with great elegance and dignity and designated Olaf as her successor. When her companions went to her bedchamber the next morning, they found her sitting there dead. The feast then served double duty for the wedding and for her funeral.

In the *Laxdale saga*, her great grandson Kjartan and his foster brother Bolli both love the beautiful Gudrun, who has already had two husbands. When Kjartan dallies too long with the King of Norway’s lovely sister, Bolli and Gudrun marry. The less attractive aspect of sagas is that they record an elaborate system of feuds, revenge, and murder, often instigated by the nagging of strong women around issues of who shall have the seat of honor and precedence. Kjartan and his men disgrace Bolli and Gudrun by placing an armed guard between their house and their outhouse. When Bolli finally attacks and kills Kjartan, Gudrun says “What I like best is that Hrefna [his wife] will not go laughing to bed tonight.”

In *Njals saga*, Bergthora chooses to die in their burning house with her husband Njal. When the burners ask her to come out, she replies “I was young when I was given to Njal and I promised him that one fate should wait us both.” In another saga, Breeches Aud revenges herself on her faithless ex husband by attacking him with a sword. The sagawriter says, “and she was certainly wearing breeches then.” When they were not urging the men into action, these strong women were running the farm, making hay, and weaving the cloth that was a main trading good. Their actions contrast strongly with those of European medieval women who embroider, sing, pray, and faint in poetic texts.

The sagawriters had a wry sense of humor. Describing an enormous snow storm, the author comments the weather “was not at all good.” In *Njal’s saga*, one of the attackers climbs up on Gunnar’s roof where Gunnar stabs him through the thatch with a spear. In response to the question about whether Gunnar was at home, Gizur says that his hallberd certainly was and falls dead. Gunnar’s sumptuous but wicked wife Hallgerd causes his death by refusing to give him two strands of her hair for a bowstring. Gunnar’s comments “everyone has some mark of distinction” and fights on to his inevitable death. Characters are also exited from the sagas as they move away or go abroad with the phrase “is out of the saga now.”

Icelanders frequently travel back to Scandinavia where they are inevitably met by the King or an Earl and treated with great hospitality. The irony is that Iceland was settled by people who did not want to come under the rule of a king and preferred to colonize Iceland to avoid that. For instance, Kjartan competes with a stranger to see who can hold the other under water longer. The stranger is King Olaf Trygvasson who eventually converts Kjartan and Bolli to Christianity and gives them substantial gifts of ships, timber, and swords. Olaf Peacock is equally well treated by his grandfather the King of Scotland when he travels there.

Icelandic sagas are a fascinating combination of historical events, wishful thinking, and interesting supernatural additions, such as ghosts, uncorrupted bodies, and enchanted swords. Heroes who are the lineal genetically-verified ancestors of current Icelanders go about their farm work, their spinning and weaving, their loving and fighting in straightforward prose rather than the poetry that dominated medieval European literature. The enterprising women, keen humor, and warm hospitality accorded to Icelanders abroad make these unusual pieces of medieval literature truly delightful and informative modern day reading.